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Virtual Worlds: Social Interactions Among Online Gamers Through Voice Chat

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VIRTUAL WORLDS: SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AMONG ONLINE GAMERS THROUGH VOICE CHAT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor in Philosophy

in

The Department of Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Online gaming scholarship has rarely focused on the micro sociological aspects of virtual worlds as much of the research on online games is undertaken by psychologists and scholars in other fields. When a sociological lens is employed in analyzing social interactions that occur in virtual worlds, new understandings of social phenomena in virtual worlds can come to light. My research draws upon multiple sociological theories to make sense of data collect via in-depth interviews and participant observations in an attempt to understand how voice chat influences relationship formation and maintenance, gender relations among online gamers, and how online gamers use the label noob to regulate gamer masculinity in virtual worlds. Findings indicate the voice chat has a both a positive and negative impact on the social interactions of online gamers.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

A growing field of study, the sociology of communication, information technologies, and media finds its sociological origin in the research of social interaction and the interrelations of self, personality, and mind (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). Social scientists have long studied the causes and consequences of human behavior and as new means to communicate and information technologies are introduced into society it remains a topic of great interest among sociologists and psychologists. Both disciplines, sociology and psychology, have contributed immensely to our understanding of social interactions and information technologies. However, it is through a sociological lens that we can come to understand the relationship between society, self, and online social interactions while maintaining a focus on the nuances of individual behavior among internet users.

As of 2020, there were approximately 4.66 billion active internet users and 2.69 billion gamers in the world (Johnson 2020). The online gaming market was valued close to \$47 billion in 2019 and is growing significantly year over year so it by no means a small industry (Adroit 2019). As technology advances by becoming increasingly portable and energy efficient such as the case with smartphones we begin to see the use of computer mediated communication technologies become increasingly normative in our social interactions (Ictech 2019). Likewise, computer mediated communication (CMC) channels such as virtual reality (VR) and video conference programs (e.g., Zoom, Skype) that are aided by peripheral devices (e.g., VR Goggles, webcams, microphones) are relatively new elements to social interactions, but with video conferencing being catapulted into public social life due the COVID-19 pandemic we know little about the implications of said information technologies on relationships as of 2021. Therefore, as our understanding of the relationships between each respective new CMC channel and social

interaction advances our sociological knowledge will be increasingly pertinent to social discourse, economics, and policymaking.

At the core of our sociological knowledge of social interaction is the understanding that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them and the meaning of such things are learned and created from the social interactions an individual has with others (Blumer 1969). These meanings are handled in, and changed through, an interpretative process used by the individual in dealing with the things they encounter (Blumer 1969). Thus, meanings are not inherent in social cues, words, and objects themselves, yet social cues and objects convey assigned meanings. Individuals use social cues, words, and objects, with varying levels of awareness, in presentation of self to impress upon others an acceptable image of self during everyday life, but presentation of self can have a more profound influence on an individual's self-concept during encounters — social interactions when individuals maintain a mutual focus of cognitive and visual attention, requiring communication privileges (Goffman 1959).

During encounters with others, if there are opportunities, individuals act accordingly to receive verification of and support for prominent identities — identities we hold as most important or central to our self-concept (McCall and Simmons 1966; 1978). This is not to say that individuals don't also aim to receive verification of salient identities — identities invoked in social interaction. Held prominent/central identities could be salient identities as centrality and salience are not mutually exclusive aspects of identity (Stryker, Sheldon, and Serpe 1994). Likewise, identities can have a high degree of salience, the probability of enacting an identity, because they will likely be invoked in a situation (Stryker and Burke 2000), but not be as central to the individual's self-concept as other identities. Role identities have been found to become

more salient as role-based others become increasingly part of an individual's social life (Walker and Lynn 2013), which stands to reason that a similar process occurs for group-based identities (e.g., gamer). Individuals have a drive to verify identities as they receive emotional gratification (Stets 2005) and so emotions are often a signal of either a threatened identity or confirmation of an identity (Smith-Lovin 1990). Therefore, individuals often seek out and form new platonic and romantic relationships to provide a reliable source of identity support and partake in activities to maintain the supportive relationships (McCall and Simmons 1966). Associated with receiving identity support and other benefits related to relationships, individuals often maintain relationships if they receive an acceptable or greater payout in positive emotional energy compared to the resources they put into relationships (Collins 2004).

Relationship maintenance involves both active strategies as well as ordinary routine behaviors that sustain the relationship or it will otherwise dissolve (McCall and Simmons 1966; Canary and Stafford 1994; Dainton and Stafford 1993). It is through these active strategies and routine behaviors online that individuals form diverse online social networks with overlapping relationships resulting in positive outcomes (Wellman 2002; 2016). Previous sociological research has focused on online social networks, identity work, and online communities, but it appears the bulk of the research on these topics comes from other academic disciplines. What influence, then, has the wide adoption of voice chat and VoIP programs by online gamers, and now the rest of the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, had on our society and online social interactions? There is a gap in our knowledge concerning voice chat and online social interactions, especially at the micro level, which is where I focus my research.

At the micro level, activities that facilitate the formation and maintenance of relationships can occur in both physical and digital spaces and to varying degrees in both types of spaces

simultaneously. Individuals engage in social interaction in digital spaces while their bodies are situated in physical spaces everyday through apps that access the internet on their smartphones (Ictech 2019). Digital and physical spaces are not mutually exclusive to an individual. Consider this scenario: two online gamers are sitting at their computer desks in homes that are a thousand miles apart while they engage in computer mediated communication (CMC) with each other while navigating their avatars through a virtual world. The players' bodies are in a physical space (i.e., the player's house), but the activity that is social in nature is taking place in a virtual world (i.e. digital space) through the embodiment of their avatars while simultaneously said to be "gaming" in the physical space. Often relationships like this occur exclusively online and remain in digital spaces without either individual experiencing the physical copresence of the other (Seiler and Ictech 2015), not to be confused with virtual copresence, the latter being an outcome of social interaction that can be experienced through CMC and virtual worlds.

As online relationships, whether platonic or romantic, expand into more digital spaces, the more intimate and rewarding they become (Lijun 2010). Of course, an online relationship only remains in digital spaces as long as the individuals desire it to remain there. These relationships adhere to similar social rules and norms that are associated with relationships that occur only in the physical world. However, there are a few known differences between online relationships and in person relationships. First, romantic relationships formed online tend to begin with the discovery of similarities and self-disclosure and not physical attraction (Cooper and Sportolari 1997). Exceptions to this are relationships formed through popular social media websites and apps where the presentation of self takes place primarily through a profile containing pictures or videos of the individual (Seiler and Ictech 2015). Second, spatial proximity is a less important factor for online relationships (Cooper and Sportolari 1997). Third,

the internet provides users with a sense of anonymity that allows them to feel more comfortable with disclosing personal information compared to copresent face-to-face interactions (Wysocki 1998). Self-disclosure, or the process of disclosing personal information, is done online through computer mediated communication (CMC) channels such as voice over internet protocol (VoIP) programs.

Until the mid-2000s, when VoIP programs also referred to as voice chat became more accessible, the average internet user predominantly used text-based CMC channels. Early scholarship on social interaction through CMC channels focused on the internet as a social world that was separate from the “real life” physical world that facilitated identity experimentation and online relationships or sexual encounters (Turkle 1995). However, social interaction online has been transformed by the ever-evolving pool of CMC channels such as social media apps and websites, audio/video programs, and online video games. Today’s participatory web (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok) is defined by user-generated content of various types and allows both users and their followers to interact publicly on the same digital front stage from different geographic locations. Users can communicate with others through high definition videos (audio included) that allow the perception of all social cues, with the exception of proximity cues, associated with in person face-to-face interaction. This makes them an effective means for communication between those who regularly interact with others online such as online gamers.

One of the most popular genres for online games is the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). An MMORPG is an online game that is based in a detailed virtual world that is inhabited by player-controlled characters, non-player characters (NPCs), and mobiles (i.e., mobs.) that contains vast amounts of cultural, visual, and auditory elements

inspired by science fiction, fantasy, and life on earth (Seiler and Ictech 2015). MMORPG players often engage in a variety of forms of CMC with other players (Cole and Griffiths 2007; Lo, Wang, and Fang 2005; Taylor 2006; Yee 2007). Some online gamers even prefer to have their social interactions occur on a CMC channel. Research on online gamers with social anxieties has shown that shy online gamers successfully use CMC channels to expand the size of their social circle and find social support (Kowert, Domahidi, and Quandt 2014). Support in these situations often takes the form of an online friendship. Among MMORPG players, a high percentage of them make life-long friends and sometimes go on to meet them in person (Cole and Griffiths 2007). While there are many positive consequences to introducing CMC channels such as voice chat to the social interactions of online gamers there are also negative consequences.

Voice chat provides users with vocal cues that can lead the to the discovery of group membership and then lead to application of stereotypes and harassment. Linguistic profiling leading to disrespect and harassment has long been an issue for female online gamers playing Xbox games (Gray 2012). Female voices have been found to get three times more negative reactions than male voices saying the same statements among online gamers (Kuznekoff and Rose 2013). Without any real regulatory oversight, it seems that male online gamers are free to perform masculinity and regulate the masculinity of other gamers as they see fit even if it would be considered harassment or bullying outside of the virtual world. However, male gamers are not the only ones performing masculinity. Female online gamers that play World of Warcraft have been found to enjoy performing masculinity in the form of aggressiveness (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, and Consalvo 2007). Given that female gamers are known to perform masculinity we know very little about the ways in which masculinity manifests among online gamers using voice chat.

CMC channels of today provide accessible venues for self-disclosure, social support, and relationship formation and maintenance through synchronous communication, but sociologists have done little to systematically investigate social interactions among online gamers at the micro level. Sociological research on online games has covered areas such as implications of the internet on social change (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson 2001), marital satisfaction among gaming couples (Ahlstrom et al. 2012), structural components of social roles in guilds (Ang and Zaphiris 2010), and the processes involved with the structural role of guild leader (Williams, Kirschner, and Suhaimi-Broder 2014), and gender identity work (Shapiro 2010). Scholars from other disciplines have covered various areas of inquiry, but have not yet investigated the influence of voice chat on social interaction among online gamers much less investigated related phenomena through a sociological lens. In this dissertation, I aim to contribute to our sociological knowledge of social interaction by investigating how online relationship formation and relationship maintenance occurs through voice chat, gender relations related to voice chat, and how masculinity is regulated through discourse over voice chats.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Interactions and Encounters

Early social interaction theorists sought to understand how individuals make sense of the world and in what ways things and others influence the behaviors of the individual. These scholars were not able to observe or theorize about social interactions that occur through computer mediated communication channels, but the core of what they contributed aids scholars from various disciplines to understand social interactions occurring online. Certainly, individuals act toward things based on their perceived meaning of those things and the meanings of such things, come from their social interactions such as conversation with others (Blumer 1969). Mead (1934) argued conversation is the most human and humanizing activity for humans to engage in. Social interaction that involves conversation often has a malleable structure. Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967, 1971) works provide sociological social psychologists with a theoretical framework that focuses on the micro level aspects of social interaction such as the processes involved in presentation of self and how individuals maintain an expressive order during an encounter. The degree to which an individual's presentation of self aligns with their ideal presentation of self will govern the degree to which their self-concepts are altered. This leads individuals to have higher self-esteem if they successfully align the two or lower self-esteem if they do not (Cooley 1967; McCall and Simmons 1966; Goffman 1967).

Individuals aim to successfully align their self-concept with their ideal presentation of self through impression management during encounters (Goffman 1967). Encounters occur when two or more individuals join each other in maintaining a mutual focus of cognitive and visual attention, requiring special communication privileges (Goffman 1963). To sustain an encounter, interlocutors use social cues and objects, with varying levels of awareness, to maintain a positive

claim to face and thus maintain the expressive order (Goffman 1959). I extend the concept of encounter, hereby called a virtual encounter, to refer to an online social interaction when two or more individuals join each other in maintaining mutual cognitive attention with the use of social cues such as bodily, visual, or vocal cues, in any combination or alone, during synchronous communication. Social interactions online occur as either virtual encounters or virtual interactions – conversation-like interactions or communication that does not require mutual focused attention. The two are not mutually exclusive to a situation or setting.

During encounters with others, if there are openings, individuals act appropriately to receive verification of and support for prominent identities (McCall and Simmons 1966; 1978) and/or salient identities (Stryker, Sheldon, and Serpe 1994). This process can result in emotions that signal either a threatened identity or confirmation of an identity (Smith-Lovin 1990). Since there are opportunities in social interaction to win identities, individuals have an incentive to verify identities to receive emotional gratification (Stets 2005). With this incentive that is central to an individual's self-concept, individuals often seek out and form new platonic and romantic relationships to provide a reliable source of identity support and partake in activities to maintain supportive relationships (McCall and Simmons 1966).

Unlike presentation of self in person, presentation of self on the internet is often disembodied and dislocated, which means that people have more freedom to present their ideal selves (Whitty 2007). For instance, individuals often embellish characteristics of themselves on online dating websites. However, they rarely consider it dishonest as they feel it is a means of “selling themselves” to others (Ellison and Heino 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, and Lai 2011). Although individuals often embellish their positive attributes or accomplishments online, most people are rather aware of the potential for an offline meeting should a relationship develop (Ellison et al.

2006). Thus, individuals often aim to balance their presentation of self between their ideal selves, their actual selves, and their expected selves (Ellison et al. 2006; Toma and Hancock 2010).

CMC channels such as dating websites and apps or social media provide great control over what an individual self-discloses and requires little involvement as it is voluntary asynchronous communication. The majority of interactions that occur on these types of social platforms are virtual interactions. Unfocused virtual interaction often occurs sporadically throughout an individual's day such as when an individual looks at their social media feed and chooses to like, follow, or comment on another user's content. While a like, follow, or comment does not necessarily express a desire to engage in a virtual encounter, it does hold a shared meaning between users. The user often communicates an idea through an action (e.g., like, love, laugh), comment, or reply video and moves on to look at other users' generated content or is engaged in virtual interactions with multiple others.

Unlike virtual interaction, which is often the predominant type of online social interaction on dating apps and some social media platforms, online social interactions can become more involved and thus more like an in person face-to-face conversation when individuals have committed to a virtual encounter. During virtual encounters, interlocutors rely on real-time social cues during synchronous communication through the CMC channel they are using. Although most CMC channels lack all the social cues individuals are accustomed to during in person face-to-face interaction such as facial expression, vocal tone, body language, body posture, gestures, and proximity, there are CMC channels that provide a majority of the aforementioned social cues. Certain VoIP programs (e.g., Zoom, Skype) allow a combination of video, voice, and text communication. Without VoIP programs or built-in voice chat features, forming successful task-oriented groups in online games would be drawn out, difficult processes.

Online games require individuals to frequently work with other, often familiar, individuals to complete content within the game's virtual world. Playing a MMORPG is a social experience (Caplan, Williams, and Yee 2009; Ducheneaut and Moore 2004) and thus those who easily befriend others have higher chances of success. Despite the prosocial qualities of MMORPGs, only a small number of researchers have focused on the positive social facets of MMORPGs (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore 2006, 2007; Williams, Caplan, Xiong 2007; Yee 2006). Many of the existing studies of MMORPGs investigate the negative aspects of the practice, such as the relationship between addiction and MMORPGs (Chuang 2006; Lee, Yu, and Lin 2007; Yee 2002) and marital satisfaction related to couples' MMORPG gaming interactions (Ahlstrom, Lundberg, Zabriskie, Eggett, and Lindsay 2012). The findings of the prosocial studies, however, conflict with the popular arguments that individuals are less connected to each other and that video games make people antisocial or socially awkward.

Early research on MMORPGs found that text-based messaging systems allow players to have hyperpersonal interactions (Yee 2006). Hyperpersonal interactions are said to have greater levels of intimacy, intensity, and saliency than face-to-face interactions because of the individual's ability to strategically construct their presentation of self (Walther 1996). When Yee's study was conducted many players still communicated through in-game text chat systems, which did not allow verbal and non-verbal social cues, only text. While conversing through in-game text chat, the player often has ample time to construct their responses in hopes of them being perceived favorably. They are allowed plenty of time because interlocutors are not expected to respond instantaneously while engaged in unfocused virtual interactions. Often the assumption is made that they can be simultaneously engaged in multiple conversations in and out of the game as well as completing quests, fighting mobs, or participating in a raid. Furthermore,

text chat allows the individual to not worry about their vocal cues and body language with the latter due to the anonymity of their physical body, they can concentrate on the content and structure of their written communication in hopes of influencing its interpretation.

Since interlocutors are forming impressions on minimal cues when text chatting they often optimistically “fill in the gaps” about the characteristics of their fellow interlocutors (Walther 1996). It stands to reason, this is also applicable to voice chat since it is missing visual cues such as body language. Walther (2006) argues, the extraordinary ability to strategically control presentation of self can facilitate self-disclosure and give text-based CMC an exceedingly higher capacity to be more personal than a face-to-face encounter. It appears the effort an individual would normally put into avoiding the act of revealing potentially embarrassing personal information is diminished because they are somewhat protected by their partial anonymity. While scholars have an understanding of how text based CMC channels with limited social cues affect social interactions in online games, very little is known about how CMC channels that allow verbal and/or visual cues affect social interactions between online gamers and thus how and why they affect online relationship formation and maintenance.

Relationship Formation and Maintenance

Sociologically, a relationship is a complex social process as opposed to a “thing” people have in their possession. A personal relationship is a reoccurring social interaction with another individual, through which each individual develops a relatively high degree of emotional closeness and familiarity with the other (Blumstein and Kollock 1988). This relationship can be platonic (i.e., no expressed sexual attraction) or romantic. A romantic relationship is a personal relationship that includes a mutually expressed sexual attraction between two individuals. These types of relationships tend to sustain high emotional energy across situations in the beginning

(Collins 2004) or from formation to early maintenance stage. The process of a relationship has a formation stage, maintenance stage, and dissolving or end stage (McCall and Simmons 1966).

Relationships are formed when certain conditions are met. During the formation stage of the relationship individuals work to establish an identity for each other through strategic self-disclosure and based upon the identity formed of the other they determine if the relationship is conducive to their sense of self. This is often referred to as the “getting to know each other” stage of a relationship in which individuals establish a standard reference for the other individual’s social, emotional, and behavioral dispositions. The relationship forms and frequent social interactions continue to the extent that each individual finds consistent identity support from the other (McCall and Simmons 1966). McCall and Simmons (1966) claim that “identity must be won and rewon continually. Audiences are fickle, and we must continually induce them anew to support our roles and legitimate our claims to particular identities.” Thus, relationships require maintenance or they would otherwise dissolve (McCall and Simmons 1966).

The relationship maintenance stage includes both active strategies along with routine behaviors that sustain the relationship (Canary and Stafford 1994; Dainton and Stafford 1993; Duck 1988; Wright 2004). Maintenance consists of “actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions... that indicate the character of the relationship” (Canary and Stafford 1994). Individuals can engage in relationship maintenance behaviors such as positivity, openness, assurances, social networking, task sharing, supportiveness, romance, humor, and joint activities (Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace 1993). Underlying the performance of these maintenance behaviors is strategic self-disclosure (Toma, Hancock, and Ellison 2008; Whitty 2008a). To be exact, during an interaction each individual controls the amount and type of information revealed about their self in an effort to give a positive impression and receive

identity support. McCall and Simmons (1966) argue that the ongoing process of identity support throughout a relationship gives rise to a feeling of closeness or identification with another— a feeling that can strengthen over time. Furthermore, relationships not only provide a reliable source of identity support, but also become part of an individual's sense of self (McCall and Simmons 1966). The persistence of a relationship depends on each individual finding consistent identity support from the other (McCall and Simmons 1966). Additionally, individuals are motivated to move continue having encounters with others in which their micro-resources pay the greatest emotional returns (Collins 2004). The internet provides spaces for users to form relationships to receive identity support that might remain online indefinitely.

An exclusively online relationship is a relationship maintained by two individuals, who have yet to meet in person, solely online through various CMC channels such as e-mail, social media, VoIP programs, and online games (Seiler and Ictech 2015). Exclusively online relationships offer numerous benefits such as sexual encounters without fear of disease or pregnancy, identity tourism, anonymity, and privacy. However, these relationships still adhere to most of the same social rules that are associated with copresent relationships. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) note a few differences between exclusively online relationships and face-to-face relationships that can influence how online relationships develop. First, romantic relationships online tend to begin with the discovery of similarities through self-disclosure and not physical attraction (Cooper and Sportolari 1997). Exceptions to this are relationships formed through popular social media websites and apps (e.g., Instagram, Facebook) where the presentation of self takes place primarily through pictures and/or videos of the individual (Seiler and Ictech 2015). Second, spatial proximity is a less important factor for online relationships overall but still important for dating websites (Cooper and Sportolari 1997). Third, the internet

allows users to withhold identifying information, which provides users with a sense of anonymity that allows them to feel more comfortable with self-disclosing compared to copresent face-to-face interactions (Wysocki 1998). This low-stress self-disclosure, along with other factors, affects the perceived quality or closeness of the online relationship.

Closeness or “knowing” is experienced the same for online relationships as it is for face-to-face in-person relationships. To “know” an individual is to confidently foresee their behaviors, likes, dislikes, as well as the various other peculiarities and to possess a confident understanding their personal history (Seiler and Ictech 2015). Several factors have been identified to influence the closeness of online relationships. Yet, self-disclosure appears to be the most influential factor. McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) found that those who disclose more personal information to their online friends report greater closeness to online friends than face-to-face friends. Additionally, closeness in online friendships is contingent on many factors such as social similarity, content, frequency and variation of activities, and length of the friendship (Mesch and Talmud 2006). Digital spaces such as the virtual worlds of online games where relationships form, maintain, and dissolve, are conducive to all of the aforementioned factors of closeness.

Platonic and romantic relationships form frequently in MMORPGs (Yee 2006). Cole and Griffiths (2007) found approximately three quarters of all individuals who play MMORPGs become good friends with other players, and that the amount of hours played per week is positively associated with the number of friends an individual has within a game. In addition, they found one third of gamers are attracted to another player at least once in their gaming career and that female players are significantly more likely to be attracted to another player (Cole and Griffiths 2007). While discovering an attraction to another player can lead to a social interaction it does not necessarily mean they will form a relationship. Players have to engage in reciprocal

self-disclosure in a “getting to know” each other phase otherwise they are just acquaintances. Cole and Griffiths (2007) found the likelihood that an individual would discuss sensitive issues with their online gaming friends was related to their anonymity. If anonymity, which implies certain social cues are not present during social interaction, facilitates self-disclosure then online relationships must be investigated with social cues in mind. While anonymity has a significant influence self-disclosure, online games are often designed by their developers to require social interaction and collaboration to progress through the game’s story or content.

Often online games have specific design elements (e.g., raids, dungeons, PvP arenas) that facilitate building long-term relationships by creating a purpose to have a guild, also known as a clan (Ang, Zaphiris, and Mahmood 2007; Williams, Xiong, Zhang, Yee, and Nickell 2006). Guilds are player organizations formed to accomplish guild-designated goals such as completing a raid, winning tournaments, and/or providing social support for its members. Members of a guild are referred to as guildmates or guildies. Smaller guilds are often more focused on social bonding and larger guilds are often more focused on hierarchies that facilitate the achievement of in-game goals (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee, and Nickell 2006). Guilds typically schedule in-game events to occur every week, thus guildmates regularly convene to collaborate on a task. Each guildmate has a role for the event and they must successfully carry out their role in order for the whole group to be successful. In this respect, guilds may give rise to a sense of belonging and provide support for its members (Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Ducheneaut et al. 2007). Guilds are catalysts for relationships, as they require repeated social interaction among members for collaboration. While online games have great potential to facilitate the formation of relationships between players who would have otherwise never met, it is up to the players to maintain their relationships.

Without the ability to be physically next to each other, geographically dispersed players must perform relationship maintenance activities regularly to keep their platonic and romantic relationships at a satisfactory level (Yee 2014). Online gamers can perform relationship maintenance via many activities such as exploring, questing, player versus player (PvP) arenas, firefights, and raiding. Raiding is an activity in which players form a group or an alliance to eradicate enemy monsters and bosses while in an arena or traveling through a cave, tower, or castle like structure. Not much is understood about how these activities affect relationship formation and maintenance among online gamers. Research on online gaming relationships is limited to a handful of studies outside of sociology that briefly and broadly mention variables that affect relationships among gamers (Williams, Xiong, Zhang, Yee, and Nickell 2006; Cole and Griffiths 2007; Ang, Zaphiris, and Mahmood 2007; Yee 2014). However, voice chat has not been investigated thoroughly yet players frequently use voice chat programs such as Ventrilo and Discord, as well as built-in voice chat features, to communicate instructions or actions they have taken during activities such as raid boss fights. Great communication is vital during battle in order to execute the groups' strategy for success. In addition to being the ideal means for effective communication, compared to text-based chat systems, the use of voice chat has been found to increase trust and relationship strength to a higher level among WoW guildmates over time (Williams, Caplan, Xiong 2007).

Doing Gender

Individuals are always doing gender. Thinking of gender as simply biological differences or merely different roles prevents us from understanding how gender influences other roles, how gender, race, and class interact with each other, and how mechanisms that produce power and inequality in social interaction are related to gender (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and

Fenstermaker 1995). That is to say, gender is not a situated identity, which becomes “assumed and relinquished as the situation demands” but rather a master identity that persists through different situations (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender is performative as it is a continual act one does with or for another individual, present or simply imaginary (Butler 2004; West and Zimmerman 1987). As West and Zimmerman (1987) note, “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine natures.” Doing gender includes socially influenced activities understood to be expressions of “natural” masculinity and femininity and that some gender displays are easier identified as related to one gender (Goffman 1976). Goffman (1976) argues that gender is a socially scripted dramatization of a culture’s definition of “natural” feminine and masculine qualities and that these scripted performances are done among individuals well versed in their cultural meanings. Thus, doing gender is embedded in our everyday interactions as not only gender displays (Goffman 1976), but also as internalized behaviors guided by a cultural frame that take little conscious effort.

While gender is produced as a result of its performance (Butler 2004), its performance is influenced by gender as a cultural frame – cultural knowledge about gender assumed to be known by all that individuals use to guide their interactions (Ridgeway 2009). However, the context of a situation changes the cultural knowledge assumed to be known and thus individuals will usually overcome the problem of coordinating their behavior with another by relying on an institutional frame (e.g., family, university, work, sporting event) in addition to a primary person frame (e.g., gender, race, age) to behave appropriately (Ridgeway 2009). Often doing gender is not as obvious as gender scripts, socio-culturally defined patterns of interaction between women and men, such as men opening doors for women (Lear 1997, Schwartz and Rutter 1998) and can

be disguised as a performance of some other characteristic (e.g., homophobia) during conversation.

Conversation is often a means to police the boundaries of what is socially acceptable and can gain certain interlocutors social rewards and others social sanctions. Pascoe (2005) found high school adolescents participated in an interactional process where they labeled fellow students “fag” as a generic insult to point out non-masculine acts to police masculinity. Initially labeling someone as a fag was thought to be solely a performance that symbolized homophobia but Pascoe found that not to be the case. The labeling of an individual as the abject identity served to control future behavior by reducing the likelihood of the individual labeled as “fag” to fail at the “masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength” or in any way demonstrating weakness or femininity. Pascoe notes, “...joking cements bonds between boys as they assure themselves and each other of their masculinity through repeated repudiations of a non-masculine position of the abject”. Pascoe’s concept of fag discourse provides an understanding that if fag as an abject identity can be used in discourse with regulatory power to define masculinity then so can other abject identities be used in the same manner. The abject identity used to regulate masculinity would then depend on other factors such as the social situation and cultural context.

The influence of Western masculinity on social interaction in virtual worlds is easy to observe as male gamers have long made up the majority of the massively multiplayer online (MMO) gamer population with female gamers only representing approximately 15% (Yee 2008). However, evidence suggests that women represent a little more than 15% of the online gaming community since women underreport their playing habits (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, and Yee 2009) yet 41% of the broader gamer population are female gamers (Clement 2020). Why is it

that men are disproportionately overrepresented in the online gamer population? Yee (2008) argues that it is not the design of a game that deters women but the social context or social environment that is unappealing to female players. In-game, female gamers are often overwhelmed with attention, harassment, sexual advances, and offers of assistance from players who assume they cannot do anything for themselves (Turkle 1995; Brehm 2013). Female WoW players often face removal from and exclusion from group activities based on stereotypes that women cause drama and do not possess adequate gaming skills (Brehm 2013). However, female players progress at the same speed or faster than male players do in the MMORPGs EverQuest II and Chevaliers' Romance III thus showing the stereotype that female gamers are inferior players to be disingenuous (Shen, Ratan, Cai, and Leavitt 2016). This stereotype might be a cause for unequal participation in digital gaming as it discourages women from trying online games as they are thought to be better suited for men (Shen et al. 2016).

Players can interpret information about another player's gender identity from information gathered through the use of CMC channels. Because voice chat affords users the ability to provide vocal cues about group membership the use of such a technology can potentially lead to the application of gender, race, or class stereotypes. Gray (2012) found "linguistic profiling" occurred often when Black female gamers played games on the Xbox Live network, largely when cues of their ethno-racial background or sexual orientation were apparent through voice chat. These gamers reported frequent disrespect and harassment from male gamers. Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) examined how gamers reacted to female versus male voices in an online first person shooter (FPS) game and found that statements made by female voices received on average, three times more negative reactions than male voices. If verbal communication makes gender a perceivable identity through the interpretation of vocal cues, then this process also

occurs when players are playing a different type of online game as their CMC channel remains consistent. However, the types of players and cultural context of each game varies to some degree, some more than others. One way that negative reactions manifest is in the interactional form of gender policing (Butler 1993).

Gender policing is an interactional process that enforces normative gender expressions through repudiation of gender displays that deviate from normative conceptions of gender (Butler 1993). Gender policing in WoW requires, to some level, social interaction among two or more players where one player is being held accountable to gender expectations by at least one other player. However, resistance to players asserting normative forms of gender is a common occurrence. The anonymity afforded by online games such as WoW allows players the opportunity to directly challenge unwanted acts of asserting normative gender expectations without consequences outside of the game (Stabile 2014). Challenges, however, are not always met with respect and understanding among the WoW community. On World of Warcraft forums, players labeled as “feminists” who comment on the community’s assumptions about masculinity and femininity, and displays of misogyny are treated as threats to the enjoyment and sociability experienced on the forum (Braithwaite 2013). While criticisms of hegemonic masculinity and sexism are valid, virtual worlds also afford gamers a way to engaged in gender fluidity.

Although the majority of online games re-inscribe the gender binary by only allowing players to choose either a male or female avatar, avatar creation is only one of the many tools players use in their performance of gender. WoW, for example, affords female gamers opportunities to perform variations of masculinity to indirectly challenge gender accountability (Stabile 2014). Female players can experience many benefits from their performance of masculinity. The hardcore female gamer often finds it pleasurable for their avatars to embody

femininity while they perform masculinity in the form of aggressiveness (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, and Consalvo 2007). Women are usually sanctioned for acting too dominant in Western society (Eagly and Karau 2002; Rudman and Fairchild 2004). Thus, women who perform masculine activities often counter traditional markers of masculinity with markers of femininity to avoid threatening the masculinity of men (Washington and Economides 2016). Concerning online gamers, very little is understood about how and why female gamers performing masculinity affects their relationship formation and maintenance with others, specifically male gamers.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I build on a relatively small number of MMORPG and online gaming studies of platonic and romantic gamer relationships and research on the influence of gender in online games to expand our sociological knowledge about social interaction through voice chat in virtual worlds. There is very little input from sociologists in this field of research, albeit other disciplines have used theory from sociological scholars, so I aim to add our unique perspective into the overall narrative of virtual worlds. Specifically, I use data collected from participant observations and in-depth interviews with online gamers mostly living in the United States to examine relationships formed and maintained through voice chat as well as performances and regulatory practices related to masculinity. I analyze participant narratives as well as field notes of social interactions in virtual worlds to understand how these processes and experiences occur through voice chat.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Because relationships play a vital role in the failure or success of online gamers, the virtual worlds of online games are prolific sites for observing and understanding relationship formation and maintenance. Much of the work done in online games is carried out by a group of four or more gamers. In fact, there are two different types of groups in online games that are organizationally different from each other – focused gatherings and social groups (Goffman 1961). Focused gatherings, typically composed of strangers, disband as quickly as they were formed. They are the most common type of group as online games tend to cater to the more casual gamer who needs to be able to find a group to play with quickly. The other type of group is the social group, which is a group such as a guild that develops organizational features that minimize the potential for social errors, improve efficiency, and most importantly, facilitates relationship formation and maintenance.

For the purpose of this research, I preferred to be in social groups as they provided me with frequent opportunities to observe rich dialogue and everyday social interactions, but like most players I participated frequently in both types of groups. Focused gatherings in online games are as the name implies, focused on the task at hand, not socializing. This is not to say that these focused gatherings are void of conversation or processes of relationship formation, but rather that social norms dictate gamers concentrate on the task and keep unrelated conversation to a minimum. Social groups in online games, on the other hand, exist outside of the official focus of activity and utilize in-game features such as text and voice chat or additional VoIP software like Discord (commonly used free VoIP program) to build and maintain relationships among members. These features allowed me to observe the processes of relationship formation and maintenance as they occur online. The several games that I chose to play to collect data

ended up being a collection of connected internet sites such as individual online games, forums, and social media. My goal of this study was to understand how individuals form and maintain relationships online.

Settings of World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy XI, and Final Fantasy XIV

World of Warcraft (WoW), released in November of 2004, is fantasy based MMORPG mostly set in the world of Azeroth, which is inhabited by Orcs, Humans, Dwarves, Undead, Elves, Tauren, Gnomes, Trolls, Draenei, Goblins, Worgens, Pandarens, and thousands of other species. Azeroth has many different landmasses but during this study most of the game's content took place on four large continents: 1) the Eastern Kingdoms, which is formed of three subcontinents, in the East, 2) Kalimdor, also formed of three subcontinents, in the West, 3) Northrend in the North, and 4) Pandaria in the South. For one expansion of the game, majority of the content took place in an alternate universe called Draenor, which in this dissertation will be included in any reference as Azeroth. These continents are surrounded by the Great Sea, which seems to occupy the whole of planet Azeroth. The world consists of many traditional fantasy elements such as knights, wizards, medieval villages, castles, and dragons but also contains some elements inspired by Eastern culture on Earth as seen in the content of the Mists of Pandaria expansion for the game. The player population of WoW has varied significantly throughout its history, but nonetheless WoW has consistently been one of the most played MMORPGs since its release in 2004. In fact, Guinness World Records crowned WoW the most popular MMORPG in 2008 when it had over 10 million subscribers (Glenday, C., and Guinness World Records Limited 2009).

WoW owes much of its popularity to the success of the Warcraft franchise (1994-Present), the wide adoption of the internet that occurred during the 2000s, and the casual (i.e.,

non-hardcore player) friendly design that allowed players to accomplish more in less time than other MMORPGs. From a marketing standpoint, its casual friendly design made WoW ahead of its time and thus it appealed to a larger audience than its predecessors such as Final Fantasy XI and Everquest. However, this does not mean that WoW is a superior game or that players reap more benefits from playing it as opposed to other MMORPGs. WoW has become the default MMORPG that many people play because it is easy to understand, popular among gamers, and receives regular new content updates. However, because it must appeal to the masses it has become the Wonder bread of MMORPGs – simple, plain, and predictable. Other MMORPGs appeal to niches WoW cannot address.

Final Fantasy XI (FFXI), released in 2002 in Japan and 2003 in the United States, fills a unique niche in the MMORPG market in that it has a more immersive environment, difficulty level not for casual players, and long franchise history that dates back to the late 1980s in Japan (Fahs and Sliva 2009). In fact, Final Fantasy XI was the first MMORPG to allow American and Japanese players to play alongside each other on the same server and the first MMORPG to be cross-platform (Adams 2004), which means players using PC, PS2, and XBOX 360 could all play on the same server. However, developer Square Enix ended support for PS2 and XBOX 360 in 2016. In FFXI, When players login they enter the virtual world of Vana'diel, which is a fantasy based world inhabited by Humes, Elvaans, Tarutarus, Galkas, Mithras, and thousands of other species of creatures related and unrelated to the ten Final Fantasy games that came before FFXI. Vana'diel, at this time, has thirteen known continents but all are not reachable to the players. The non-player characters, landscapes, and towns of the continents are inspired by medieval Europe and Japan for the most part and previous Final Fantasy lore. The FFXI virtual world is large in comparison to other virtual worlds, but rather than a seamless transition from

area to area, players must load the data for a new location when they step into the new area. The areas in FFXI have a more realistic appearance than WoW, which is often described as cartoonish, and each area has its own unique song performed by an orchestra. Many wonder why FFXI is not as well-known as WoW or lacks the player base of other MMORPGs. The FFXI and WoW gamers that I have spoken to about this situation seem to be in consensus that WoW was released approximately one year after FFXI in the United States and with its casual friendly game design it appealed to a large number of FFXI players that wanted to play a game that required less “work.” This was also corroborated by narratives on FFXI and WoW forums that can still be found today through a Google search. However, in 2012 FFXI was reported to be the most profitable Final Fantasy game ever (IGN 2012). An exhaustive internet search for an updated status or a successor to this title comes up empty handed as of the time of this study. Additionally, the developers continue to produce high quality content, make improvements to the game, and maintain an active website as of 2021 despite the existence of the second Final Fantasy MMORPG launched in 2010.

Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV), released in 2010, is fantasy based MMORPG set in the world of Hydaelyn, which is inhabited by Humans, Elezen, Lalafell, Roegadyn, Miqu’te, and thousands of other species consistent with its predecessor FFXI and other Final Fantasy titles. The races in FFXIV are almost identical to those of FFXI. The game is essentially a hybrid version of WoW and FFXI. It is graphically superior to FFXI while still having the same overall aesthetic, but gameplay and content are structured similar to WoW. Even though FFXIV plays like WoW and can be easily mastered by WoW players, this was not always the case. FFXIV was rebooted in 2013 as Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn, but prior to this reboot it was designed like FFXI and thus had slower gameplay and required players to have large in-game

social networks to complete time-consuming content. The main complaints at this time were that there was not enough content and that the game felt unfinished. Square Enix, the company that owns the Final Fantasy franchise, decided to replace some of the developers and rebuild the game from the ground up to compete with WoW. Square Enix took the servers down on November 11, 2012 until August 27, 2013. What was delivered next was a Final Fantasy themed, WoW clone. After the reboot, the player population did increase but according to a player population tracking website called MMO Populations (2020), FFXIV's player population has still never come close to the player population of WoW. The game remains moderately successful as far as player subscriptions and continues to receive regular updates as of this study.

Data Collection

I collected data through participant observations and semi-structured interviews with online gamers. From November, 2014 through January 2019, I conducted approximately 1800 hours of participant observation in-game among various online games (on and off VoIP programs/voice chat). However, there were times when I was playing solo, usually doing quests and missions, not making observations. I was able to gain access to my sites of observation by downloading the online games with purchase sometimes necessary. In the MMORPG games, I would then create an avatar and find a guild to join. In total, I joined three raiding guilds and two social guilds. Participating in a range of guild activities allowed me to observe the structural differences between raiding guilds and social guilds. Each guild had varying demographic compositions, structural components, and playstyles. Additionally, WoW allows anyone to join a particular server and facilitates cross-server interactions through instant messenger, raids, and player-versus-player activities so the individuals involved in the observations were from many different servers and often different countries. While in the field, my observations in MMORPGs

temporarily ended when guildmates stopped playing the game consistently due to boredom, which is often during several months leading up to a new expansion for the game.

While acknowledging the criticisms of covert participant observation and ethnography such as deception and lack of participants' rights (Spicker 2011), in this case covert participant observation was the most suitable method available. Full disclosure of my research agenda would have prevented access to guilds or influenced the behavior of individuals, however at no point did I deceive or lie to anyone in my guilds about being a researcher and what I am researching. In order to minimize influencing social interactions I privately disclosed my research to guildmates if they asked what I do for a living or what I am studying in school. Therefore, a handful of individuals came to know I was a researcher and thereafter willingly participated in my study as informants and interviewees. With this in mind, I have taken every measure to conceal identities in order to protect my guildmates. Additionally, all of my observations were made in public-like digital spaces through in-game written communication and non-exclusive or semi-exclusive channels on VoIP programs. Thus, this study was IRB-approved (see Appendix B) since subjects were exposed to no risk from the research process beyond the risk already associated with the activity. Field notes from the covert participant observations were recorded by typing verbatim everything each individual involved said along with any social cues they expressed in digital word documents while playing each respective game. Interviews were similarly transcribed from audio recordings.

In addition to observations, I conducted 41 interviews with online gamers. The 41 participants ranged in age from 19 to 45 years, 10 were female gamers (24.3%) and 31 were male gamers (75.3%). The first round of interviews, I formally interviewed 10 MMORPG players about their MMORPG relationships, social interactions, and social media habits. The

social media data was not used in my analysis for this study as my focus shifted more toward understanding gender related phenomena. Participants were initially recruited using the convenience sampling approach; starting with gamers recruited in-game from the guild and free company, messages in the general chat that reaches the whole server on WoW, and social media recruiting. After the completion of the initial 10 interviews I started to develop theoretical categories that I wished to explore further beyond MMORPGs as I thought my concepts could apply to a broader population, online gamers. The participants for the 31 interviews that followed were recruited using theoretical sampling so that I could develop and refine the properties of my theoretical categories (Charmaz 2014). That is, interviewees were recruited on the basis that data collected from their interview would help me address any gaps in my analysis, which meant that a majority of these players would not be solely MMORPG players, but rather a mix of MMORPG, first person shooter (FPS), Sports, and multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) gamers.

Prior to interviewing players, I explained that I am interested in their various interactions with other gamers and the intricacies of their relationships with other gamers. The interviews conducted were focused in a way that gave participants the freedom to discuss anything about any game that they thought was relevant to their experiences with online games. The second round of interviews were completed by August 2019. For this round of interviews, I added specific questions related to gender and the label of noob as these were related to theoretical concepts formed from previously collected data. In both rounds, the interview instrument served as guide to guarantee key topics were discussed, and provided fluidity for respondents to share their stories and opinions (Charmaz 2014). Demographic information such as age, race, and gender were asked directly to all participants at the beginning of each interview. Additionally,

Interviews provided me with unique insight into the experiences of online gamers and added to my understanding of my observations.

The semi-structured interviews were roughly one and a half hours long each in English, even with international participants. Interviews were conducted through a VoIP program such as Ventrilo and recorded on my computer. The whereabouts of the participant's avatar was often unknown as they could be in one of a thousand places. My avatar would often be standing in a city surrounded by several other gamers' avatars. All participants agreed to consent and were read a script prior to the interview questions. Participants were not provided compensation for participation, but if they were in my guild, I might have already assisted them in accomplishing an in-game task. To minimize any potential aversion to disclosing personal information with a stranger, a guarantee of confidentiality was clearly discussed with each participant so that they knew there was no possibility of anyone figuring out their identity. Therefore, all participants were assigned pseudonyms for transcripts, field notes, and scholarly publications.

Timeline of Events

In November 2014, I began research for this project by participating in the World of Warcraft (WoW) and Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV) communities as a player and member of a guild in WoW and a free company in FFXIV. Both of these organizations were established on U.S. servers as opposed to European or Asian servers. The WoW guild was led by a middle aged, White, heterosexual, female gamer and the FFXIV guild was led by a middle aged, White, heterosexual male player. They would both be considered raiding guilds as opposed to social guilds. The guild I was initially a member of in WoW splintered off into another guild to be led by a male player that approached raiding in a more serious manner with stricter rules of conduct. I decided to join the new guild because most of the player I had befriended joined as well. With

the raiding guilds, I would regularly do dungeons, raids, and end game events with these guilds every week. In June 2017, I began to play Final Fantasy XI again with friends from FFXIV, which is an MMORPG that I played for two years from 2003 to 2005 and on and off many times from 2005-2014. In FFXI, I joined a social guild for returning players. For all three MMORPGs, I would play when I had free time and sometimes take breaks for a few weeks at a time when friends and players would stop logging on as often. They would normally come back when new content was added to the game and you could visibly see this in the main cities where players congregate. Without anyone to participate in the content with me at slow times, I could only group up with random players that did not make the best gaming companions due to the temporary nature of PUGs (pickup groups). Instead of sitting around in town, I would follow my MMORPG friends to whatever game they were playing during their break from WoW and FFXIV. I did not have this problem with FFXI because the game has a plethora of relevant content that tends to keep players entertained. Thus, this ethnographic study has multiple research sites as should be expected when one studies internet phenomena since the internet has no physical space and individuals have nearly full access to all that is on the internet.

Data Analysis

Assessing the factors that influence relationship formation and maintenance processes among online gamers through voice chat involved four stages of data analysis. Data were coded throughout the study after either field notes were taken or interviews were transcribed. The units of analysis are both the individual and the group as they interplay to shape the situation. This approach to coding avoids the fallacy of sociological reductionism that assumes that what individuals do in a group is only because of the group context (Morgan 1997). Prior to coding, I developed a four part coding scheme to provide a frame for my analytical approach comprised of

three coding techniques to disassemble the data and a fourth to put it back together into coherent categories. As Charmaz (2014) points out, creating a frame can either extend or limit your analysis depending on the topic and researcher's ability to accept ambiguity. In this case, the frame provided an adequate amount of structure, but also allowed for some flexibility with an inductive approach to the coding techniques. For each document of data I coded in a three stage sequence.

The first stage was process coding, which is an inductive coding technique used to denote "observable and conceptual action in the data" (Saldana 2016). I used phrases beginning with gerunds ("-ing words") to indicate actions or behaviors taken by online gamers in the data. Example of process codes used in this dissertation: disclosing personal information, telling a joke, working together, and labeling/calling them a noob. In the second stage of coding, I inductively employed dramaturgical coding to signify intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions (Saldana 2016). Dramaturgical codes apply the terms of a 'social drama' (e.g., objective, tactic, conflict) such as those used in Goffman's dramaturgical theory with a one word inductive description following the dramaturgical concept (Saldana 2016). Examples of dramaturgical codes used in this dissertation: objective: discipline, conflict: affront, and emotion: anger. In the third stage of coding, I used causation coding going incident to incident (e.g., talking about personal issues while PvPing) as opposed to sentence by sentence down the page of field notes and transcripts to identify variables that led toward certain outcomes (Saldana 2016). Incident to incident coding aids in theorizing how a process develops, is maintained, and changes (Charmaz 2014). Examples of causation codes used in this dissertation: self-disclosure to bonding to friendship, joking around to sense of comradery, and underperformance to noob. I chose to use these three coding techniques to get at the processes involved and understand the

influence an individual's or group's actions have on relationships formed among gamers while being able to put together a narrative of the performances of gamers.

In the fourth stage of analysis, I used slightly modified version of axial coding that involved grouping related codes together to then create sub-categories. Related sub-categories were grouped to create broader categories or themes. I was able to make the connections between them as I became familiar with social experiences they represented for online gamers. As Charmaz (2014) notes, this process “reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding.” In this case, the aforementioned three coding techniques (i.e., process, dramaturgical, causation) were used to “fracture” the data. The sub-categories were formed using a phrase that brings meaning to the overall relationship among the codes. For example, the sub-category of voice chat means effective communication consists of codes such as communicating instructions is easier, coordinating actions, understanding emotions, getting excited, emotions: happy, emotions: sad, emotions: angry, joking around to sense of comradery, and self-disclosure to bonding to friendship. These codes and more lead to the development of the category voice chat means effective communication, which became part of the theme relationships through voice chat.

In addition to the coding techniques, my codes were partially informed by sensitizing concepts common in sociological social psychology such as self-disclosure, identity, emotion, bonding, labeling, and relationship. This means they would be part of my codes I used such as bonding over common interest, labeling them a noob, and emotion: happy. Sensitizing concepts were used from the start of this research project as they are concepts that I am interested in understanding. According to Charmaz (2003, p. 259), “sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience; they are embedded in our disciplinary emphases and

perspectival proclivities” and that they are merely starting points in from which to study data. During the coding process, I kept a list of all my codes as they developed during the aforementioned coding processes to stay consistent with my use of concepts. Often lines of text would have multiple codes attached to them due to the three stages of coding. Codes were condensed if redundant or split up if too general as deemed necessary during the simultaneous data collection and coding processes. For example, the causation code of self-disclosure to attachment to relationship was split up so that the latter part of the code distinguished between a romantic and platonic relationship, which were both used thereafter when applicable.

Reflexivity/Positionality

It was important that I engaged in reflexivity and identify my own positionality during this research and consider how my past experiences and social positions affect how I observed social phenomena. In being reflexive, researchers can come to understand and appreciate that knowledge gained and descriptions made are not those that can be achieved without influence from previous experiences (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). My experiences with internet technologies, computers, and video games is not the average users experience as I grew up from a young age making hobby related websites and I currently build custom websites and computers for others on a regular basis. Additionally, my childhood was during an era when video game consoles such as Nintendo, Super Nintendo, and Playstation were in almost every home of my peers. Most importantly, I was also one of the early adopters of 3D PC gaming in the mid-90s and cross-cultural online gaming in the early 2000s. In the mid-90s, the PC games I played were not online games, but introduced me to a level of immersion I had not previously experienced with console games. The worlds of the games I played were more interactive with non-player characters that reacted to me in real time with a simple form of artificial intelligence. The online

games that I played in the early 2000s exposed me to relationships that were formed and maintained only through text chat while playing the game. Thus before I had ever started my academic journey to become a scholar I knew that friendships could be formed and maintained for years strictly online. Some of those friendships had such a lasting impression on me that I remember the names of the avatars (not the individuals) almost 20 years later.

In addition, my social position as a mixed-race, Latino, male influences how I interact with others more so than how others interact with me in virtual worlds. I remain relatively anonymous, except for social cues associated with being a male player, when I am playing but the same cannot be said for other players. While playing MMORPGs, I often observed individuals saying sexist, homophobic, and racist remarks. As a mixed-race, Latino I want to confront these individuals as they should be corrected, but as a researcher I do not want to create a situation that jeopardizes my position in my guild or server. During these situations, I reflexively find myself mentally navigating a continuum of complicity (Becker and Aiello 2013). My Latino heritage and my mixed-race identity makes me hyper-aware of racism and prejudice during my research. I do take this with me into virtual worlds, but for the sake of my research I do not speak up and remain complicit when conflicts occur. Unexpectedly, conflicts dealing with race were a lot less common than sexism and blatant homophobia while conducting my observations. I contribute this to the lack visual cues since most communication is through voice chat or text chat. Negative consequences of the decision to remain complicit are that sometimes nobody spoke up so the individuals being offensive got away with it so to speak and that individuals that were victims of racism, sexism, and homophobia might not have received emotional support during or after the incident.

My participants only had limited knowledge about me as a researcher and online gamer. I

recognized that I was experiencing the duality of being both an insider, someone who shares similar interests and is a group member, and outsider, someone observing and recording everything from a social scientific perspective —in-game. I made it a point to downplay my role as a researcher and to emphasize my role as an online gamer to build a rapport with my interview participants and fellow guildmates as what we can do and ask of our participants depends on how they identify and know us (Charmaz 2014). Understanding the influence I had pertaining to my participants' narratives, I was cautious to not disclose any person information such as my social position, political beliefs, and sexuality as this information could affect the meanings produced during my interviews and participant observations.

CHAPTER 4. RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH VOICE CHAT

Indeed online gaming is a fun leisure activity for all ages and it would be somewhat accurate for lay people to assume this is what entices people to play online games, but surely there is more to online games than fun. What really keeps people coming back for more? That is, what turns people into lifelong online gamers? Research has identified motivations for online gamers to play such as receiving enjoyment from social interaction, immersion, and/or achievement (Yee 2007), which have later been successfully used in quantitative analyses (Lou, Zu, Zhu 2019). While early online gaming research conducted prior to the proliferation of voice chat has provided these insightful yet broader descriptions of motivations to play online games, the how and why online gamers achieve the aforementioned enjoyment outcomes has yet to be fully revealed. This chapter discusses how relationships and their emotional energy, largely due to voice chat, is a prominent motivational factor among online gamers that keeps them logging in to play. I begin this discussion with a common scenario in FFXI that I experienced dozens of times during my time in Vana'diel.

After several hours of killing monsters alongside friends and a few new acquaintances for experience points, we found ourselves laying still, faces in the sand, waiting for someone to come raise us from the dead so we didn't have to make the long trek back to our camp in the dunes, an unforgiving desert. We shouted for help in the chat, asked our linkshell members, and people on our friends lists for help hoping someone would come assist us — a white mage or someone that could cast a “raise” spell on all of us. Each time we saw a player running by, dodging the dangerous creatures that roamed the sandy dunes, we hoped that they could help us find a compassionate healer to come to our aid. Getting a raise not only meant that someone of us would not have to make the long, dangerous run back to the camp we were hunting in, it

meant we would also gain back some of the experience points we lost from dying, which would equate to about 20 minutes' worth of work. After all, it took us about an hour just to form the group and get to our camp. But most importantly we all knew that every minute that passed the probability of losing someone in the party increased as lying dead in the sand was a waste of a precious commodity, time.

As this experience reveals, online gamers can spend several hours together during one given gaming session and an individual's relationships and network of friends situated in a virtual world are crucial to completing tasks and goals. In situations like the one in the dunes, that spanned hours, relationships are formed, and bonds are forged as individuals talk about their interests and share personal information to pass the time because often activities such as leveling, or questing are repetitive and monotonous. Relationships — in the sociological sense of the word — are the building blocks of online gaming communities. This chapter's findings illustrate that various benefits received from relationships formed and maintained within the technological infrastructure known as the "world" or virtual world are the significant factors that motivate individuals to continue playing online games. Virtual world in this sense means the place (e.g., planet, continent, country, map, combination of zones) that players' avatars are situated in and they interact with other players in, including the supplemental technology used for communications. Additionally, this chapter's findings show that through the facilitation of voice over internet protocol (VoIP) programs or voice chat, while often initially used for effective communication, can be utilized to form and maintain relationships situated in virtual worlds that can be close, provide social support, and create emotional energy.

Voice Chat Means Effective Communication

Voice chat aided online gamers in effectively communicating during virtual encounters by supporting vocal cues that helped them convey assigned meanings to their comments, descriptions, directions, and requests. For example, Albo, a 23 year old male online gamer, who uses voice chat nearly every time he plays, spoke of how voice chat influences his gaming experience. He explained that he mainly uses it for the “objective of the game,” so his team “knows what is going on” and that they are “all in sync.” When he described the general reason as to why they need to use voice chat while playing he said, “we are all trying to win and that’s just any game.” Many participants shared Albo’s sentiment about using voice chat to help complete the objective of the game. Danan, a 35 year old male online gamer, explained that voice chat promotes team communication because it is “in real time, providing immediate feedback among teammates” and he spent “roughly 70%” of his time on voice chat planning, coordinating and going over game mechanics. Danan’s approach to discussing their strategy was casual and lighthearted like sitting “around a coffee table” with friends. He would not be able to convey a friendly tone naturally and effectively without his friends hearing his vocal cues through voice chat. During my participation in WoW and FFXIV raids, often leaders would signal the seriousness of their instructions by using a deeper vocal pitch articulating each word deliberately so there was no confusion. This state of seriousness and focus was like clockwork every time before we entered a raid or began a difficult boss fight. Additionally, during raids you could determine the urgency of another player’s request or command if they spoke quickly and loudly. The alternative if you are not using voice chat is to type a message to your raiding party that you need something to be done, which can cause you to make a mistake and/or have your comment go unnoticed. While voice chat is effective for communicating information related to

raiding it is also effective for communicating under different contexts as it allows users to convey emotions with context like whether they are joking, sad, happy, serious, and so forth through their vocal cues.

Voice chat facilitates the charge up and sustainability of emotional energy for relationships and groups across situations in virtual worlds because individuals can express emotions through their voice as opposed to relying on text chat. Late one afternoon, while playing FFXIV with my guildmates we transitioned from talking about the serious matter of beating a raid that we were still pumped up about to joking around with each other through voice chat. Bud, one of my friends in Hydaelyn, said something funny about hipsters and I energetically told him that he should not talk poorly about his people, which got a laugh out of him. And this was funny because we both knew he would not be considered a hipster. He immediately responded with “what are you talking about, you have black framed glasses” in reference to some photos he saw of me on social media wearing reading glasses. In combination with the high emotional energy we had sustained across numerous encounters, I could tell by the higher pitch in his voice and dynamics of his delivery that he meant no offense. This also signaled to me that he understood my original statement to be a joke. This conversation went on for no less than 10 minutes moving from us poking fun at each other to joking about coffee snobbery and then Bud assigning hipster points to each of us in the group based on what kind of coffee we liked. The whole conversation was filled with laughter and each participant expressed enjoyment through their vocal cues. Whether joking about hipsters, memes, or funny videos, voice chat allows online gamers to convey meaning through their vocal cues as they would in person, face-to-face. The emotional energy created from positive social interaction through voice chat carries across situations. The buildup of emotional energy such as happiness across

successful encounters produces feelings of solidarity and drives individuals to initiate future social interactions (Collins 2004).

Voice Chat Facilitates Relationship Formation and Maintenance

Online gamers often used voice chat to form relationships that they eventually enjoyed more than the game. A majority of participants used voice chat in the aforementioned manner as opposed to strictly using it for completing tasks. Ang, a 28 year old male gamer, talked to me about the benefits of voice chat and how he began to prioritize relationships over the game's objectives: "It adds to the fun of games, also lets you meet new people all the time, I've made some great friends like that, it's like it just stops being only about a game, and more about actually meeting people." Ang emphasized the importance of his friendships and how the enjoyability of online gaming came mostly from spending time with his friends using voice chat programs such as Discord. Other narratives regarding motivations for playing online games conveyed that progressing in a game is the initial reason why gamers form groups, but that the enjoyability experienced while talking to friends through voice chat is the significant driving force as to why gamers continue to login to play online games. Pochi, a 25 year old male online gamer, explained the process of making new friends while using voice chat that he experiences in virtual worlds:

In order to meet people, there needs to be some sort of connection. MMORPGs make a great connection because the game usually involves some sort of reward that makes you log in daily. Add in the fact that some of these rewards involve having other people with you, it's a great ice-breaker. Do enough of these with the same people and it will eventually lead to idle chit-chats and whatnot. If some sort of clique formed then I'll usually stay around and chat longer. Talking is whole lot easier than typing after all. Once that clique is solidified, the scenario eventually becomes that when I login, the friend would also log in, that kind of thing.

As Pochi explains, the joint activity is the catalyst to the relationship formation process, sparking the initial dialogue that can lead to groups of friends forming or cliques. He expressed that the idle chit chats using voice chat during the joint activities helped him get to know the other gamers. Congruent with my observations, many participants described scenarios when a joint activity initiates the formation stage of their relationship with another gamer where they work to establish a standard reference for the other gamer's social, emotional, and behavioral dispositions. This process aims to establish if future interactions will be emotionally beneficial for those involved and if so the possibility of initiating another social interaction is possible (Collins 2004). In Pochi's example, friends that made up a clique, charged with emotional energy, maintained their relationships with each other by gathering for endeavors when they recognized that each other were online at the same time.

Voice chat was the window to emotional energy for online gamers. Individuals are motivated to move toward encounters in which their micro-resources pay the greatest emotional returns (Collins 2004). Since voice chat makes communicating effective and nearly effortless it makes sense that online gamers rely on it to receive greater emotional returns. Sam, a 19 year old male online gamer, told me that, "...voice chat is really the window that just makes video games, especially online video games so, I don't know, attractive to me because. It's what I like to do. It's more about talking to friends than playing the game's most of the time." Sam came to the realization that many other participants had reached, online games were simply the join activity used to bring people together for what they were really interested in, the emotional energy charged and sustained through their relationships over voice chat. Sam continued to express that the game was secondary to his relationships: "A lot of the times I turn on x-box and nobody is on I'll just turn it right back off, or ill text somebody to get on. I don't know, I just don't really think

playing video games by myself is fun for the most part, even if it's a new game that just came out." Just like with Pochi, Sam expressed that he derived happiness or enjoyability through his encounters with his online gaming friends. Participants experienced emotional energy in various ways including through the process of self-disclosure.

During gatherings, online gamers engaged in enjoyable, self-disclosure through voice chat with gaming friends during the relationship maintenance stage, the stage after "getting to know" an individual. Matsuko, a 25 year old male WoW player, spoke with me candidly about how conversations through voice chat with people he has never met or seen outside of the virtual world can involve levels of self-disclosure an individual would normally have in-person with family, close friends, or romantic partners. He said, "...after getting to know somebody for a while, and when we're actually talking, we could have conversations for hours about life and things we want to do and things we could have done differently." Matsuko indicates that all this happens while playing the game together. He implies that there is an initial "getting to know somebody for a while" stage and a stage afterward of "when we're actually talking". In-game activities and conversations that charged up emotion energy helped online gamers maintain their relationships. Self-disclosure among friends during sequential in-game activities was a common participant narrative and was observed frequently during my participant observations, almost every time I played.

Many participants touched on the idea that the stronger their friendship with another gamer the more likely they were to engage in self-disclosure through voice chat because they trusted the other gamer or gamers. Participants often shared information about their lives and personal issues while using voice chat, some easier than others. Emmi, a 28 year old female online gamer, spoke about forming friendships and disclosing personal information with other

online gamers once reaching an adequate level of trust and many other gamers echoed the same sentiment. And this is because when an individual verifies their self-view the process of trust is activated and through the continuation of this process the individual begins to develop more trust in, and dependence on, the other individual. Once an individual trusts someone and they prove their dependability, self-disclosure comes easier and feelings of closeness and commitment can develop (McCall and Simmons 1966). Gamers often engage in the process of trust that leads to self-disclosure as Emmi told me, “when I have the required trust, it is actually easier to share my life with someone who I will never see. Sometimes there are things that I cannot share with my real life friends that I can easily share with my virtual friends.” Emmi explained that she trusts her online gaming friends more and feels closer to them. I observed in Azeroth, Vana’diel, and Hydaelyn that players who formed strong friendships with each other would disclose personal information about their home life and romantic relationships in voice chat and in return would often receive social support.

Through my observations and participants’ narratives social support provided by online gaming friends manifested in virtual worlds most commonly as emotional, instrumental, and informational support. I had one particularly memorable moment where I provided emotional support for an online gaming friend. During my time in Hydaelyn and Vana’diel I formed a strong friendship with another male online gamer in my guild, close to my age, with common interests so we would play together often. Over the years as we talked through voice chat we got to know each other, he got to know things about my wife and kid, and we often exchanged advice about matters not related to the online games we were playing. One day we were talking online in private when he disclosed to me that he was “gay” and just came out to his mom. He expressed that he felt he could trust me and knew I wouldn’t judge him or let others know this

information because he wasn't "out or anything" yet. The amount of courage he displayed in "coming out" to someone he has never met in-person, only in virtual worlds over voice chat, demonstrates the level of trust that can be built leading to self-disclosure between two online gamers, thousands of miles apart. Just like in participant narratives, I provided dependable emotional support for a gaming friend that I have never met in person.

Social support disproportionately occurred in cliques during my observations and in participants' narratives. In fact, most participants implied that their social interactions in virtual worlds were in groups of three or more by using words like "friends," "they," or "guys" in recounting examples, which aligns with common knowledge that most online games require teams or large groups to do end game or high level content. This means that when social support occurs it is most often in a group setting. Cam, an 18 year old male online gamer, explained to me that while he does a lot of "joking around" with his gaming friends through voice chat that a good bit of their conversations involve personal matters. He described to me how they provide each other social support in various ways:

Most of the time, actually we'll get more personal, like ask how each other's day was like, what went on, and how they're doing or if they need any help with homework or anything like that. Sometimes it'll be about family stuff, just anything really, you know like what you would talk to your friend about.

Cam continued to explain to me that he hangs out with his online gaming friends using voice chat just like the friends he has in "real life" and that they give the same "support that good friends give in real life." Cam was able to self-disclose and receive social support in return because he had formed strong friendships with other gamers. Cam's online gaming friends provided him emotional support by asking about his day or how he is doing and informational support by helping him with homework. Many participants shared this sentiment that online gaming friends provide social support in various ways and that social support was one reason

they enjoyed interacting with their gaming friends on a regular basis. Social support functioned as a means to charge emotional energy. Additionally, Morty, a 21 year old male online gamer, shared the he, like many other participants, gave advice to his online gaming friends for practical matters such as career paths, completing school assignments, applying for loans, and fixing vehicles. He explained that because they are all friends that they help each other when they are “struggling with something” just like friends do in “real life.” Throughout my time spent in Azeroth, Hydaelyn, and Vana’diel, I observed informational and instrumental support almost every time I used voice chat with a group. Social support served as a dependable reward for maintaining a relationship with another gamer.

Online games and voice chat provided an easily available space for male participants to engage in self-disclosure with other male online gamers. Privacy was not a concern because online gamers can utilize features of voice chat to prevent outsiders from entering their voice chat channel that provides a situation similar to a locker room. Like traditional sports, online games are well suited for male bonding. Sports research has found that for male-only teams playing a sport affords the athletes a way to seek status and bond through group activities with minimal intimacy (Dunning 1981; Messner 1989; Sabo and Panepinto 1990). Many male participants spoke about bonding with “the guys” over voice chat while playing games and discussing issues outside of the game. Sometimes these issues were personal but often they remained on the surface. For example, when asked what they talk about on voice chat, Rew, a 22 year old male online gamer told me, “we are just goofing off and making fun of each other and joking around. Talking about what we are doing and other stuff like that.” He went on to explain that he would talk about things such as work, plans, hunting, and working out with his online gaming friends. He indicated that he talked about whatever he wanted to with his male online

gaming friends like many other male participants. Spaces like this within the context of “sport” (i.e., e-sport) like this were not readily available to non-athletes until the last 15 or so years.

Conclusion

Online gamers expressed that they used voice chat because it facilitated effective communication by supporting vocal cues that helped them convey assigned meanings to their comments, descriptions, directions, and requests. Likewise, voice chat helped online gamers convey their emotions and charge emotional energy that carried across situations. Vocal cues allowed individuals to effortlessly express emotions such as happiness when interacting with others. I found that in addition to the utilitarian reasoning behind using voice chat that online gamers overwhelmingly used voice chat to facilitate social interactions that revolved around relationships. While progressing in a game’s content was the initial reason why they formed groups and used voice chat it was not the current reason they continue to play online games. The enjoyability experienced while conversing with online gaming friends through voice chat became the significant driving force as to why they continued to login to play online games. Online gamers engaged in self-disclosure through voice chat with gaming friends during the relationship maintenance stage because they trusted the other gamer or gamers. Additionally, they often used voice chat as a tool to maintain relationships that provided a reliable source of social support and participate in activities to maintain supportive relationships that were loaded with emotional energy.

CHAPTER 5. GENDER RELATIONS AND VOICE CHAT

As my guildmates celebrated their victory over a raid boss and boasted about their damage percentiles I waited and listened to their revelry. One of the guys bragged about making the 95th percentile while another calls out another male guildmate for underperforming, saying he is “trash.” The accused guildmate quickly responded with “I never said I wasn’t” in what seemed to be an attempt to end the trash talk and get the attention off of his lackluster performance. In between all the commotion I heard a female guildmate trying to join in, but those talking, all male gamers, were so loud that either her comments were not heard or completely ignored. She finally was able to make a suggestion about trying another fight during a short pause in chatter, but the guild leader promptly shut her down by saying “we don’t have enough!” and she replies, “we do have enough.” And she was correct according to my knowledge about this particular raid boss. Then radio silence for a few minutes. Without any acknowledgement of her remark, the silence was broken by a directive from the guild leader to get ready for the next fight.

As this vignette shows, there is high emotional energy that follows conquering a powerful foe by using one’s body, or in this case an avatar’s body, as an instrument of violence – an accomplishment of masculinity (Messner 1990). This accomplishment requires overcoming the odds of defeating an opponent vastly more powerful than any individual avatar through the coordination of violence acted out by many avatars each one controlled by an individual online gamer. It also reveals how female online gamers can experience a difficult time trying to have their thoughts heard and considered over a large group of mostly male online gamers in a sporting-like environment, which I observed often during group events. I refer to it as a sporting-like environment because players are often competing against other teammates to see who does the most damage or gets the most kills while also killing other gamers’ avatars (e.g., team vs.

team) or non-player characters (e.g., raid bosses). Computer gaming has also been turned into a professional sport called e-sports (Taylor 2012). Past research has shown that violent sport often supports male dominance not merely through the exclusion or marginalization of females, but also through the association of males and maleness with valued skills and accepted use of aggression, force, or violence (Bryson 1987). During my observations, the opinions of male gamers were rarely ignored by our guild leaders while on the other hand our female guildmates opinions and requests for gear after battle were often ignored. This could be specific to the guilds I participated in, but a pattern of this behavior was recorded across games and guilds. Despite this experience, the female gamer in the vignette did not quit the guild because the male guild leader failed to discuss it further and ignored her last statement, she continued raiding with us for months to come. It is situations like this that demonstrate perseverance – a behavioral aspect of human agency – that keeps an individual progressing forward despite adversities. Her perseverance was revealed through her commitment to her own interests and motivations for playing online games in the face of any potential inequalities she experienced. Certainly, male and female online gamers can demonstrate perseverance, but the perseverance of interest in this dissertation relates to gender relations and online games where perseverance in the face of adversity was disproportionately displayed by female online gamers. Additionally, based on observations like the example above, perseverance seems to function as a behavioral component of agency related to how individuals are able to navigate inequitable social relations that are organized by primary frames such as gender for a long period of time.

Ridgeway (2011) argues that gender inequalities staying power comes from individuals' use of sex and gender together as a primary frame for organizing social relations. For people to coordinate effectively during social interactions they organize the interaction using categories of

shared cultural knowledge – primary frames – from which to base their joint actions. The use of gender as a primary frame influences the behavior of individuals and their interpretations in social situations that vary by context (Ridgeway 2011). In virtual worlds, gender as a primary frame heavily influences gamers starting at the creation of their avatar and the role a player chooses when they start or restart the game to whom might be picked to fulfill a role in a group activity.

Today, most virtual worlds are masculine spaces largely inhabited and controlled by male gamers that are less than welcoming to female gamers (Yee 2008; Brehm 2013). There is a strong masculine norm in games such as WoW that affects gaming experiences (Williams et al. 2009; Yee 2008) and in this context behaviors which can result in dismissal or hostility toward expressions of femininity are often observed (Salter and Blodgett 2012). Thus, group activities in virtual worlds often favor male gamers and maintain positional inequalities between women and men. During my observations and interviews, patterns emerged signaling that there has been a slight shift in how gender as a primary frame influences behavior among female and male online gamers in western online gaming culture. Male online gamers acknowledging their own male privilege and speaking about harassment experienced by female gamers and female gamers' revealing their gender identity through voice chat despite potential harassment contradicts behavior previously documented in online gaming research. The aforementioned findings are discussed below.

Male Gamers Speaking About Gender

Male online gamers expressed that their male gender identity did not have any negative influence on their gaming experiences. Fortin, a 24 year old male online gamer, acknowledged that console games and PC games were male dominated and as a consequence told me that he

“can’t say being a male has affected anything.” Fortin believed that being a male gamer he was able to play online games as he saw fit and could act “normally.” Fortin was aware of his male privilege yet spoke about it as a matter of fact and not in a bragging manner. Indeed, most of my male interview participants mentioned the idea of virtual worlds being male dominated as a known fact and how it allowed them to act masculine and not worry about negative social sanctions for masculine behaviors. Jamer, another 24 year old male online gamer, expressed there was a latent positive value in being a male gamer and having the privilege of not needing to worry about negative commentary regarding his actions in virtual worlds:

I don’t really get a lot of crap because I am a male and I understand that, umm, but it’s, I guess it’s been more positive to males then it has been to females, but I don’t know because I have never been a girl or woman in my life... I guess they take it typically that I am just a guy playing video games.

The “they” Jamer is speaking of are the other male gamers he is playing the game alongside. Every time the notion of “just a guy” was mentioned during an interview it seemed to imply that male online gamers are not expected to challenge any masculine norms and thus receive respect by default from other gamers. However, this was not the case for female gamers as expressed by male and female participants.

Male online gamers talked about how the female voice would trigger some male gamers to disrespect female online gamers. Joka, a 21 year old male online gamer, who played alongside many female gamers, spoke of some of the disrespect female gamers received when their gender identity was revealed through voice chat. He explained to me there is a broader opinion that “most girls are noobs” and stressed that this is not his opinion. His awareness of an unsupported generalization about female gamers lacking gaming related skills made him sensitive to how gender is associated with respect:

Being a male in the video game culture is actually more respected than being a female and trying to make it in the video game realm. Most gamers I would say are guys. If a bunch of guys were playing counterstrike, and a girl used her mic, all the guys would flip their shit and barrage the girl and harass her basically just for being a girl.

Joka has made it clear that just “being a girl” is an obstacle for female gamers and that he is aware of this prejudice against female gamers that some outspoken male gamers hold. Similarly, many male participants were aware of the unfair treatment of female gamers such as disparaging remarks about their gaming skills, but also pointed out that female gamers can receive unwanted attention in the form of “romance” or sexual harassment.

For example, Damian, a 22 year old male gamer, who plays various online games, explained that he is aware that there is potential for female gamers to be harassed and he was not one of those “people trying to harass them or anything.” Damian points out another form of harassment other than being called pejoratives that female gamers might have to experience:

I mean, just playing with girls in the past and seeing, like, as soon as someone has a girly name or picture, then people will start making comments. Like either being overly nice or inappropriate to them. Just in that aspect. So, I mean, I can see how that would hurt your experience trying to just play a game and then there’s people just harassing you or trying too hard to be nice to you, which is annoying in its own way, when you just want to be like any other player.

Damian suggested that he has witnessed various types of sexual harassment consistently over 12 years of playing online games. Twice he mentioned in the same sentence that male gamers were either exceptionally “nice” or acting inappropriate toward the female gamer. He was not the only male participant to bring up sexual harassment or the sexual pursuit of female gamers. Most of the male participants acknowledged that some male gamers pursue female gamers romantically in virtual worlds either aggressively or by being exceedingly supportive, sometimes the latter is referred to as “white knight.” Both strategies were expressed to be inappropriate by

participants, but white knighting was only mentioned specifically by name by a few participants. However, I heard the insult used on numerous occasions during my observations in WoW. While the first strategy is inappropriate for obvious reasons, “white knighting” in online games is less obvious to those not familiar with online games or gaming forum jargon. When I asked Hemp, a 21 year old male online gamer, about it he explained that “white knighting is when a guy comes to the defense of a female player or makes excuses for her actions simply because she is female. It’s the internet’s version of chivalry and kind of reinforces the belief that women need protecting.” While he did not give an explanation about the motivation or goal of a white knight, Joka told me that “white knights are a nice guy and they think it will lead to getting sex, which is delusional if you ask me.” Although white knighting might not fit the traditional definition of sexual harassment it seems to have the same end goal of getting the romantic attention of the female gamer and in different contexts it has been found to be a form of benevolent sexism (Ruiz 2019). It was clear that participants had a problem with the “overly nice” guy persona. Very few participants failed to mention a form of sexual harassment against female gamers and a few went as far as citing toxic masculinity as the issue. None of the participants claimed to sexually harass female gamers or be a white knight. Likewise, there was not enough data to speak to male gamers confronting or dealing with sexual harassment as it occurred. The consensus appears to be that male gamers can act normally due to their gender identity and are highly aware that female gamers can experience harassment from male gamers while online gaming once their gender identity is revealed through voice chat.

Female Avatars and Gender Identity

Simply playing as a female avatar is not convincing enough for a gamer to be perceived as a female gamer because many male gamers choose to play as female avatars. During my

observations in Azeroth, I knew many male gamers who chose to play a female avatar. In other online games, gamers often have to choose to play as a female avatar because it was the only way to play a certain role, class, race, or character by the game's design. For example, in the world of Vana'diel the best race to choose if you wanted to have the most optimized thief or ranger is Mithra who possessed superior dexterity and agility compared to other races. Yet, Mithra are only playable as female Mithras so players in the game knew that there was a high probability that the person playing the Mithra character was a male. Players came up with the nickname for these avatars, "Manthra". The label Manthra was often used dissuade male gamers from flirting with them. During one of our leveling parties, absent of voice chat, a male Elvaan warrior started to flirt with a Mithra thief in between fights by waving and hugging the Mithra. The Mithra ignored his gestures at first, but once the Elvaan started to call the Mithra "sexy" the gamer playing the Mithra quickly identified themselves as a Manthra by saying, "Hey dude cut it out I'm a manthra." And that was the end of that interaction because we began the next fight. Additionally, to dissuade sexual harassment Manthras would self-identify as Manthra or put "I'm a guy" in their bio that could be checked by clicking on their avatar. I would see this type of gender identifier often in the bios when I checked Mithra avatars. FFXI is not the only game in which playing a female avatar is ideal. There are many online games such as League of Legends, Overwatch, Heroes of the Storm, and Smite that design each character to be unique in their abilities so sometimes the only option is to play a female or male character/avatar if you wish to use their exclusive abilities.

As this observation of a social interaction absent of voice chat demonstrates, avatars are not accurate indicators of a gamer's gender identity. The FFXI community created a new label for male gamers playing as a Mithra to avoid faux pas and sexual harassment for when vocal

cues were absent from the social interaction. Vocal cues now play a significant role in everyday social interaction among online gamers as gamers cannot rely on the appearance of an avatar to determine a player's gender identity. As discussed in the rest of this chapter, most female participants' narratives mentioned their vocal cues as the main factor used in the identification of their gender identity. However, past research suggests that the fear of retaliation from male online gamers for not adhering to the male norm can result in negative outcomes such as not being able to disclose a female gender identity and avoiding voice chat (Brehm 2013). I did not find any evidence to suggest that female gamers avoided voice chat, but instead found that female gamers regularly used and revealed their gender identity through voice chat.

Revealing A Female Gender Identity Through Voice Chat

Female participants were not strangers to using voice chat and preferred to use it over text messaging in-game. In fact, all of them used it and I played alongside female gamers almost every time during my observations. Cendoza, a 34 year old female gamer, talked about using voice chat on a daily basis while hanging out with mostly male gamers. She told me she thinks using voice chat to talk is "cool" and "it's better for communication especially when playing with other players due to strategic plans when raiding or when doing dungeons." Cendoza never expressed any hesitation in using voice chat just like most female participants. However, participants' narratives revealed a darker relationship between voice chat and gender identity. Vocal cues revealing gender identity came up often in both female and male participants' narratives about gender and social interactions.

Many male participants mentioned not only their experiences, but also the experiences of female gamers revealing their gender identity through their vocal cues. Dolton, a 21 year old male online gamer, mentioned in his account that female gamers are not treated the same as male

gamers and that if female gamers don't talk then they wouldn't experience any negative consequences:

...people are definitely a lot more respectful about what you say if you're a guy than if you're a girl in video games, because a lot of gamers don't really take girls seriously for some reason... as long as you can play, I don't think there's much, besides like communication-wise, like how people talk to you, is gonna affect you, but I mean, if you don't talk, then it would really not affect anything.

While Dolton gave me a simplistic and uncritical explanation of how gender affects female online gamers' experiences, he touched on a phenomenon mentioned earlier in this study, vocal cues being crucial for assigning gender to players (see chapter 4). Likewise, many participants who spoke about the experiences of female gamers brought up the importance of voice to determine a gamer's gender and how that would potentially trigger negative feedback for female gamers.

Female participants spoke about their negative experiences once their female gender identity was revealed through voice chat. Honora, a 20 year old female online gamer, described a pattern of similar experiences related to her gender identity being determined by her voice:

...it sucks when you get on the game and as soon as they hear that you're a girl the first thing they say, "Oh you can't play. Oh, you're gonna suck". Or they'll be like, "Oh, I'm going to get the most kills off of you" and then as the game goes on, it gets quiet once they realize you can play. Some of them, they start to get friendly. Other ones, they, just end up calling you all types of names—just gotta mute those.

Dolton and Honora both point out that the female voice has an immense amount of influence on the experience of female gamers. Many other female participants agreed that once they spoke over voice chat that's when the behavior of some male gamers became more aggressive or intense.

Melison, a 31 year old female World of Warcraft player, when asked about her experiences when male gamers discover she is a female gamer told me with a tone in her voice

that expressed her annoyance: “Yes, they hit on my character. A lot. And it takes away from my experience in the game. Sometimes guys can say abusive stuff too like using foul language or calling my character a slut.” As a strategy to stop the male players from making anymore sexual advances toward her because it was making her uncomfortable she would tell them, “I’m in a relationship” and mentioned her boyfriend. She explained that this strategy worked most of the time and allowed her to keep playing. Many of the female participants claimed to use the same or similar strategy to end the unwanted sexual harassment, comparable to the way male gamers used “Manthra” in FFXI, so they could continue to raid, quest, and PvP unbothered. Almost every female participant experienced sexual harassment at some point and persisted to play online games despite the potential to be sexually harassed by a male online gamer.

Female participants expressed that they persevered and did not let sexual harassment stop them from playing. Ballard, a 37 year old female gamer, was aggressively pursued by a male gamer she met raiding in Azeroth. She explained that she has “had male players pursue relationships beyond the game of a romantic or sexual nature” but this gamer stalked her. “He backtraced my email and found out where I lived. He used to send me creepy Stabbing Westward lyrics.” she told me. Ballard continued to play WoW on the same server as him for a while as her passion to play outweighed her concern of him and the sexual harassment she experienced. She told me she did not know how to get rid of him at first and would entertain him with conversation, until he unknowingly gave her a way out. One day after sending her song lyrics he expressed suicidal thoughts, which she knew she could report to authorities and have them handle the situation. Ballard said after that he stopped playing on the server and she was to never hear from him again. However, Ballard demonstrated her perseverance when she did not

stop playing WoW simply because a male gamer was harassing her and like most of the other female participants, she knew the potential for harassment was there yet she played anyway.

Conclusion

Male online gamers spoke openly about their male privilege, although in a less academic manner, and the harassment experienced by female gamers. Male gamers were aware that just “being a girl” is an obstacle for female gamers and that some male gamers harbor unsubstantiated biases against female gamers such as generalizations that female gamers lack online gaming related skills. This is not to say that the male participants are all champions of gender equality, but that they are aware of gender inequality in virtual worlds and felt they should mention it in their interviews. In addition, both female and male participants expressed the importance of vocal cues in identifying the gender of a gamer. Participants’ shared some of the ways female gamers experience sexual harassment once their gender identity is revealed by vocal cues. Female gamers’ displayed a significant level of perseverance by revealing their gender identity through voice chat and continuing to persevere and play passionately during and after sexual harassment. I found there is no evidence to support that notion that female gamers avoid voice chat as claimed by past research on gender and online games (Brehm 2013). Instead, this exploratory study revealed that female gamers can have a level of perseverance that drives them to continue playing and using voice chat.

CHAPTER 6. NOOB DISCOURSE AND MASCULINITY

“Don’t be a noob and learn how to heal right!” Moz teased Izi after her apology for failing to heal our tank enough to take the next attack from the boss, which caused our 20-player group to all die at the point of the tanks untimely demise. As we all lay there dead on the floor for a few seconds after failing, this is what we heard from a guildmate — Not encouragement to try again or a “we’ll get ‘em next time!” This was typical “trash talk” you would hear among a group of friends after one or more persons cause a group to lose a fight in WoW.

As this brief moment from a raid fight reveals, anyone can be called a noob if they mess up, even female gamers. It seems that I did not go more than a week without hearing a gamer label another gamer a noob or a synonymous label while conducting my observations in Azeroth, Hydaelyn, and Vana’diel. The idea of having a noob on your team or in your guild was dreaded by many as it could mean hours or wasted time and consequently feelings of frustration. When I asked my interview participants what it meant to be a noob the most common initial response I received is they are a “new player” to the game, not a new gamer. Fortin, a 24 year old male online gamer, described to me a common scenario of when someone would be called a noob and what the label of noob meant to him:

So typically, you would call someone a noob if they have never played the game before, or give the impression they have never played before. For example, if it’s someone you’re going against you can tell based off of movement and missing shots. You can tell if they are a noob by missing targets.

Many of my interview participants agreed that a noob was someone who gave the impression to be a new player based on their failure to demonstrate mastery of a skill such as aiming with their avatar in an online first person shooter game. Likewise, in Azeroth, Vana’diel, and Hydaelyn players who were new would sometimes be labeled a noob. The dual meaning given to the word noob by participants can be attributed to its origin. The word noob comes from the word newbie

which according Oxford English Dictionary means “an inexperienced newcomer to a particular activity”. According to folk lore (i.e., several unofficial sources and forum posts) anyone can find with a Google search, n00b (with two zeros) as a variation of newbie was created by hackers when they created a new way to write words that replaced letters with numbers (e.g., h4x0r instead of hacker) to get around language filters and/or avoid being discovered by authorities on online forums. Noob or n00b thereafter became popular sometime in the 1990s as people new to a technology or gaming related community. Fast forward to the 2020s and new players are often still referred to as newbies and noobs. However, a gamer cannot be a newbie or new player of a game forever. At some point they lose the label of new player among those that know them and at this point can only be assumed to be new by others with whom they are not acquainted. This supports the notion that gamer is a static, primary identity within the context of virtual worlds and newbie or new player merely a label that eventually drops off in time. If a gamer can lose the label of new player as time passes then the label of noob must have a meaning beyond the surface level definition of new player if long time players can be labeled a noob as an insult. With this understanding I dug further into the impression of being a noob in online gaming communities and I found the label held a much profounder meaning than being a new player.

Noob is the most commonly understood epithet one gamer can call another to affront their identity as a gamer and discipline any deviation from the online gaming community’s standards of mastery. Standards found to be tied to masculinity in online gaming culture as discussed below. While traditional characteristics of masculinity in the United States include, but are not limited to: assertiveness, aggressiveness, strength, competitiveness, and individualism (Hantover 1978; O’Neill 1982; Pascoe and Bridges 2016). Masculinity is not homogenous across situations or environments. Rather, there are multiple masculinities with some being subordinate

or marginalized in comparison to others created by differences in race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and occupation (Connell 1987). Given that masculinity is influenced by historical and social context in which it is performed and operates, it follows that online gaming masculinity would have some differences as well as similarities to traditional masculinity. Research has already shown that technical knowledge and expertise are socially defined as masculine (Cockburn 1988; Turkle 1984, 1988; Hacker 1990) and that computing culture possesses its own type of masculinity (Wright 1996; Kendall 1999, 2000). Additionally, research has identified a few traits associated with masculinity in online gaming culture including, but not limited to: demonstrations of competitiveness and mastery of computer games (Taylor 2012). It is implied that mastery of computer games refers to the mastery of the elements of the game, which consists of aspects such as technical/game specific knowledge and the avatar's abilities, power, and movements. Given the aforementioned traits of computer culture and online gaming masculinity, it follows that performances of masculinity occur in virtual worlds often because not only does progressing in a majority of online games require a degree of cooperation among gamers to carryout competitive, difficult, violent objectives such as killing dragons and opponents in duels. To do so successfully, the players involved must be knowledgeable about the rules of the fight (e.g., mechanics), be highly skilled in using their avatar's abilities in coordination with others, and have enough power as an individual avatar and collectively do enough to damage to kill the opponent or opponents before they kill you. This is the typical battle scenario for most online games. Certainly male online gamers could be said to be performing a specific masculinity associated with online gaming while each uses their avatar's body, weapons, and abilities to commit acts of violence. What then about the female gamers involved in these same violent activities?

Masculinity does not merely reduce down to the male body and its effects and in many instances heroic masculinity has been found to be produced by female and male bodies (Halberstalm 2018). I use masculinity not as a fixed trait embedded in an individual's body but as a label that identifies a behavior or set of behaviors that accomplish a demonstration or use of power — gamer masculinity in virtual worlds is something you do and/or accomplish. Masculinity then, can be different according to the context of social settings and gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In this chapter I explore how female gamers are performing the same gamer masculinity alongside their male counterparts and often support standards of mastery set by the virtual world's community. Previous research found female online gamers that play World of Warcraft enjoyed performing masculinity in the form of aggressiveness (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, and Consalvo 2007). However, I found that it goes beyond enjoyment as both female and male gamers regulate masculinity in an interactional process through which they verbally label and reject the label of noob.

While spending time in virtual worlds I observed two types of interactions in which players were labeled noob, which were also found during my interviews. The use of noob in discourse occurred either in a serious interaction or in a joking interaction with the latter occurring typically among friends. In both, the common theme was that gamers were often labeled noob when they failed to meet one or more of these three pillars of mastery: mastery of skills (e.g., using abilities correctly, maneuvering, coordinating, etc.), knowledge (e.g., how things work, knowing strategies, how to complete quests/missions), and avatar power (e.g., avatar's level, strength stat, intelligence stat) in the pursuit of dominance over other gamers or non-player characters (NPCs) in the virtual world. Much nuance can be involved in assessing whether or not a gamer is a master of skills, knowledge, and avatar power (actively increased

depending on the game). For example, a paladin which is typically a tank class can both sustain high amounts of damage as a tank and heal themselves or others at the same while maneuvering around a battle arena and maintaining the attention of the raid boss so they sustain the bulk of the damage. Mastering skills, knowledge, and avatar power means that a gamer is effective in battle as they use their avatar to enact *violence* – a use of physical force or power against others tied directly to masculinity in western culture (Connell 1991; Polk 1999; Tomsen 1997).

The Other Symbolic Meaning of Noob

Becoming a noob has more to do with failing to demonstrate one's mastery of skills, knowledge, and/or avatar's power and by proxy the gamer's power, than it does with being a new player. During my observations, a pattern of gamers being labeled a noob emerged when individuals made mistakes in ways that jeopardized the team's objective. The tone of the accuser's voice would often sound either annoyed or angry when orally communicated through voice chat and included exclamation points when communicated through text chats. When asked about calling other gamers a noob, Honora, a 21 year old female gamer, told me they call people a lot worse things than noob, but that she calls other gamers a noob "when they suck at the game." She was clear with me that her definition of noob has nothing to do with being a new player and everything to do with the skills of the gamer behind the avatar. Similarly, Albo, a 23 year old male online gamer, told me that he prefers to play with skilled players and not noobs when playing Fortnite. He explained, "It's fun playing in a group of four 'cause especially if you have four people who aren't noobs then it makes it a lot easier to win a game and it's pretty satisfying to win a game when there is 96 other people in the game against you." Albo found satisfaction in overcoming the odds and accomplishing the domination of his team's 96 opponents – real gamers that had their avatar's violently killed in battle. Likewise, Hark, a 22

year old male gamer, said that a noob is “someone that doesn’t know how to play the game and is bad at the game” and how noobs would ruin his raiding experience in WoW by stealing loot when they “never helped out killing the bosses.” He did not mention being new to the game as a part of the definition of noob, but instead, noobs to him are not good at the game and do not contribute to the group’s objective of defeating bosses in raids. Likewise, other participants described a noob as “not skilled,” “not good,” or “not knowledgeable.”

There was a recurring theme of noobs not possessing the level of knowledge necessary to be a masterful gamer. For example, Cendoza, a 34 year old female online gamer, told me about a time she was called a noob by a male gamer in her guild because she “didn’t know how to do the Chocobo quest” and “got them killed.” Chocobos are rideable birds in FFXIV. She continued to tell me about another time she was called a noob by a male gamer when she was helping other players level up. She stated, “This person said to heal him and his friends and they all died within minutes” and she was immediately called a noob and criticized because she did not meet performance expectations of a level 50 healer, which was the highest level a player could achieve at the time. In her case, she explained that even though she was not a new player she was “new to healing a group of players and did not know the best strategy” for keeping them all alive. Similarly, Grygs, a 26 year old male online gamer, talked about how lacking knowledge is a part of being a noob. He explained that a gamer is a noob when they think “that they know how to play their class but have no idea what they’re doing and instead of asking someone, this person even argues about being good, but in reality this person is a noob or a casual gamer.” Many participants also mentioned that a gamer can be called a noob for merely not demonstrating a mastery of knowledge about quests in the virtual world or their class (i.e., role, job, profession). Grygs, continued to explain that a “casual gamer is basically a noob.”

Participants' narratives occasionally brought up a label other than noob that had a synonymous symbolic meaning.

Zed, a 20 year old male online gamer, was asked about noobs in virtual worlds and he explained that he uses another, yet synonymous, label:

...I use bot because most games people play there are modes you can play by yourself against CPU's and they're called bots. You can put these bots on the highest level and I'll still destroy all of them, they're not good. So you insult them by calling them bots because even CPU's are better. If you have terrible aim or no awareness I'm gonna call you a bot. (laughs)

The insult of being called a bot serves as a negative reinforcement for the gamer not demonstrating their mastery of the avatar and its abilities. In this case, it's a tactic that aims to define what level of aiming skill and environmental awareness is not acceptable, which at the same time defines what level of mastery for a particular skill and knowledge is acceptable. During my observations and interviews there were multiple labels that surfaced to have nearly the same symbolic meaning and were interchangeable. In virtual worlds, the derogatory labels of noob, scrub, bot, or pleb serve to police what is acceptable in virtual worlds by labeling gamers that do not demonstrate their mastery of skills, knowledge, or avatar power with a derogatory label. I hereby refer to these labels using the precursor label of noob as an umbrella concept to include any label used in virtual worlds that functions in such a way.

Gamers often rejected the label of noob in various ways that try to mitigate the affront to their masculinity. Once during my observations in a WoW raid, a male gamer reprimanded another male gamer for having low damage per second and was called a noob. To defend his failure to demonstrate his avatar's power (i.e., his power) the accused responded: "I'm not a noob, I just need better gear." This gamer's strategy to defend their masculinity was to deflect and shift the blame of failure onto something that is somewhat out of their control such as getting

good armor and weapons since these types of items are dropped at random once a raid boss is killed. Female gamers would also reject the label of noob by telling the accuser to “shut up” or the sometimes harsher, “shut the f*** up,” but never took the confrontation beyond a one or two line verbal defense or rejection of the label whereas male gamers would often escalate the confrontation to the next level. For example, male gamers would retaliate by calling the accuser a noob with insults such as “Shut the f*** up. You’re a noob.” in an attempt to silence the accuser by affronting the accuser’s masculinity. Similarly, noob was rejected while also claiming mastery in skills, knowledge, or power. Late one night in The Far East of Hydaelyn during a raid, Rhodie, a 45 year old male gamer and guild leader, could not hold his tongue any longer and lashed out at some of our guildmates for “playing like a bunch of noobs.” One of our guildmates was mad that he was being accused of being a noob because he thought it was one particular players fault. He quickly and loudly said “I know my sh**! Don’t call me a noob.” The guild leader tried to calm him down by saying it was only a joke even though it was not presented as a joke when he initially accused them of being noobs. After a couple of attempts at the raid boss we were done for the night and that’s where it ended, unresolved. In this example, the accused claimed mastery of knowledge while telling the guild leader to not call him a noob. The fear of losing face or being seen as less than masculine motivates many male gamers to meet confrontation head on. This same type of fear and confrontational behavior is often associated with bar fights (Graham and Wells 2003). Their propensity for violence is tied directly to their masculinity (Connell 1991; Polk 1999; Tomsen 1997). However, not all accusations of being a noob were meant as an insult or to affront one’s masculinity. At other times, gamers would call a friend a noob when they made an error or underperformed, but the insult was taken as a joke.

Noob Jokes and Relationships

Noob discourse is central to online gamers' joking relationships. During my observations and interviews I found in addition to the more derogatory tone possible during noob discourse, that noob discourse can also be performed jokingly to point out when gamers failed to demonstrate mastery. A pattern emerged of gamers being labeled a noob in a joking manner during activities among friends. Jamer, a 24 year old male online gamer, described to me when he would call someone a noob while playing an online game with others:

Personally for me when I call someone a noob when I'm playing with friends, I'm making fun of them honestly, but I really don't call people noobs in the sense that it was actually created... I kinda use it as a way to make fun of my friends, but I have known them at that point where if I say anything like that, that is slightly derogatory it's not going to affect our relationship. (Coughs) So I don't use it in the way we all intend it, I don't say it in the way the world anticipates us saying, or the way the world anticipates me to say it. I just do it more playfully.

While still maintaining a friendship with the other gamers, Jamer could still point out his friends' failures to demonstrate mastery of their avatar's abilities such as missing their target when shooting or getting killed by calling them a noob. The insult is understood to be a joke and not meant to offend them. Regardless of being a joke it still functions as a disciplinary tactic in defining which performance of masculinity is expected while gaming by pointing out which performance is not acceptable — failure to demonstrate mastery of their avatar's abilities. While exploring virtual worlds and using voice chat, noob discourse such as this was often couched in a playful tone with laughter to cue to the accused that it was a joke and within the parameters of their friendship. While occasionally, I ran across gamers with a dry sense of humor engaged in noob discourse, the roasting style of humor (i.e., disparagement humor) was most common. Humorous communication such as roasting is accompanied by cues that convey it is a joke that activates a conversational rule of levity — to change from the usual serious mindset to a playful

or nonserious humor mindset to interpret it (Zillmann 1983; 2000). Online gamers found that roasting each other, in particular calling each other noobs, was amusing or entertaining.

In most cases, participants said calling their friends a noob was entertaining to them and others in their group and the accused would not take offense to the label. Bud, a 24 year old male gamer told me that while in Hydaelyn he called his friends online a noob as a funny insult. When discussing why he called them a noob he said. “I know they’re top players, but if they do something dumb on accident then it’s funny to call them a noob. It’s like an insult but not really offensive, if a top player makes a noob mistake then they know it.” Doing something dumb in this case meant getting killed or making an incorrect maneuver during a raid resulting in a negative consequence such as group members taking large amounts of damage or failing to kill the boss. Bud is pointing out that the label of noob is used in discourse to point out mistakes made in performances of gamer masculinity (e.g., killing the boss) within the virtual world. Likewise, Pochi, a 25 year old male gamer, told me that calling another gamer a noob is “similar to insulting somebody with a punchline that you know is not true. We’re all human. Sometimes we make really dumb mistakes that would earn us such insults. Happens to everybody.” Similar to Bud, Pochi is referring to mistakes made in battle such as failing to kill a lesser monster, not completing a sequence that turns off an opponent’s ability, or move fast enough to dodge an attack. However, both Bud and Pochi refer the label noob as an insult that is a consequence of making a “mistake” or failure to accomplish an action that is related to one of the three pillars of mastery. During my observations, online gamers who played the healer role could also be called a noob if they need not heal enough in terms of numbers or if their healing was inadequate to keep avatars alive during battle because their avatar lacked enough healing power or they did not know the correct way to use their avatar’s skills.

The ease at which any gamer can be called noob when playing among friends is a constant reminder to gamers that at any point they can be called a noob if they are not upholding the virtual world's standards of mastery. Garmir, a 32 year old male online gamer, spoke about how easy it is to be called a noob for lacking knowledge or failing at a task:

Noob is sort of like a curse word, and gets thrown out there a lot. Like curse words you can use it to offend somebody or just to make a silly remark or joke. So even when you or your friend forgets basic knowledge or fails at something easy, if somebody is there to see you fail, or you tell the story of how it happened, you will get noob thrown at you.

Garmir, like many other male participants, was no stranger to being called a noob. He told me that he expects someone to call him or his friends a noob when they mess up. In this narrative, Garmir, is pointing out that failing to demonstrate mastery of knowledge and skill, which are tied to gamer masculinity, results in players being called a noob. Gamers often noted that any little slip up in their performance or failing a task could result in them being called a noob by friends. None of them wanted to be called a noob as they thought their level of "skill" made them superior to a noob. I found it's a concept used widely in joking relationships among male and female gamers.

Online gamers would often throw the label noob back and forth at each other in an effort to deflect the insult quickly back at the other gamer in a joking manner. Once again, showing that noob is not a static identity, but rather a fluid, sometimes sticky, label that online gamers constantly aim to avoid. One of the many times I participated in rated battlegrounds in Azeroth, two male gamers from my guild, Moz and Ganshin, were bickering back and forth about who did the best after the match by comparing killing blows and overall damage. Ganshin jokingly called Moz a noob for having only a few killing blows and thus Moz, known for his vulgar language, responded with the challenge, "You're the noob. I'll whoop you're a** in a duel, bro!" The two

gamers did not immediately battle each other but several days later after continuing to roast each other in voice chat we gathered outside a garrison and their avatars ferociously charged, slashed, stabbed, and shot at each other until one of them was forced to automatically yield at low health by the game. Moz got the upper hand being a hunter wielding a bow and arrows, strategically using distance to his advantage while his pet attacked Ganshin. There was no finishing blow to kill the Ganshin's avatar, but the defeat was just as humiliating. Moz demonstrated his dominance over Ganshin with his superior mastery of skills and his avatar's strength and thus demonstrated his masculinity. Moz bragged and taunted the losing gamer with "see you little b**ch, you suck", adding insult to Ganshin's humiliating defeat. Ganshin took his defeat with poise and offered a few reasons as to why he lost. Despite this confrontation outside the garrison these two gamers continued to play together for the length of my field observations as this entire confrontation was couched within their joking relationship and no offense was taken by either party. I only observed battles to prove one is not a noob among male online gamers in WoW, which speaks to the male online gamer's strong desire to prove their gamer masculinity among their peers. In FFXI and FFXIV duels were not possible so these scenarios would play out differently such as competing for the most damage per second in a raid. Overall, these types of performances, the back and forth labeling and duels or contests, offer those involved the opportunity to demonstrate they are not a noob.

Occasionally, female gamers call other gamers a noob to point out when they fail to demonstrate mastery of skills, knowledge, and avatar power to enforce and support the virtual world's standards of mastery. Isona, a 30 year old female gamer, acknowledged that calling another gamer a noob was an insult and would call another gamer a noob when "they keep messing up as a tank in the dungeon and can't hold threat" or when "they are carrying a flag in a

battleground and don't know what to do with it." She explained that noobs regularly grab the flag in a battleground when she is the tank and they won't pass it to her, ultimately allowing the other team to score a point. Isona pointed out a failure to demonstrate mastery of a skill such as holding hate (i.e., attention of the boss on your avatar) and a failure to demonstrate mastery of knowledge as reasons to call someone a noob. Frustrations over the failings of noobs was common among my participants' stories and observed frequently during my time in virtual worlds. During my observations, gamers holding back the group's objective were dealt with immediately due the challenging logistics of forming large groups of individuals with responsibilities in the physical world. Pim, a 41 year old Female gamer and guild leader, would often get frustrated with individuals not demonstrating mastery of skills, knowledge, and power and kick them from her large raid groups. She'd do so with little thought as to their feelings and would say things like, "Damn noobs... that need to learn their class" over our voice chat. Meaning they need to master their avatar's skills, which are specific to a class (e.g., warrior, priest, mage). Others in the raid group rarely disagreed with her decisions and often echoed her that they were noobs and thus disciplinary actions such as being booted from a raid or guild were taken swiftly. However, noob was more often used in discourse by female participants in the joking manner among friends as a subtle disciplinary mechanism.

Conclusion

Being a noob in online games means an individual has failed at demonstrating their gamer masculinity, which is performed and achieved through demonstrations of mastery of knowledge, skills, and avatar power or in any way underperforming. Accusing a gamer of being a noob serves as a discourse with which gamers discipline each other to uphold the virtual world's standards of mastery. In virtual worlds, a certain level of mastery is always expected of

gamers. When a gamer does not demonstrate mastery of skills, knowledge, or avatar power (e.g., avatar's strength) relevant to their role they run the risk of being labeled a noob. Therefore, being labeled a noob puts the accused gamer in a position outside of masculinity and thus that plays a part during social interactions in defining masculinity among gamers, even female gamers. Viewing noob as fluid label rather than a primary identity in virtual worlds revealed that it can be used as a means to deny masculinity to others, spark contests of masculinity, and subtly regulate gamers' behaviors.

Noob discourse is an interactional process in which gamers label, define, and often reject the label of noob. Both types, joking and serious noob discourse police the boundaries of masculinity. While noob discourse performed in a joking manner, often between friends, is a more subtle regulatory power that allows gamers to avoid insulting others, a derogatory or serious approach to noob discourse is perceived as an affront the accused gamer's identity. Thus masculinity for gamers, partially becomes regular identity work in order to ward off the identity threatening label of noob.

Indeed, the concept of noob discourse received inspiration from fag discourse (Pascoe 2005). Noob discourse and fag discourse are similar in that they are both used to regulate the boundaries of masculinity (Pascoe 2005), but noob discourse is centered on the masculine qualities of knowledge, skill, and power of an individual in relation to their role in virtual worlds. Contrary to Pascoe's (2005) fag discourse, it was not found to be racialized nor was it found to have explicit gendered meanings such as not being a man. I have provided evidence that even female gamers can be called a noob and label others as noob. However, noob extends beyond an individual's masculine identity to their very identity of gamer. When gamers call other gamers a noob in addition to the disciplinary mechanism of the accusation it also means they question the

individual's identity as a gamer, as "real" gamers are highly skilled, powerful, and knowledgeable in relation to their role.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

The findings of this dissertation are positioned around my observations in virtual worlds over a few years and interview participant's experiences and relationships with other gamers through voice chat. Voice chat as a computer mediated communication channel has proliferated in use among online gamers in the last decade yet little is known of its influence on social interaction within virtual worlds. Participants expressed that they are motivated to use VoIP programs and built-in voice chat features because the technology allows for faster and more effective communication compared to text chat. More specifically, vocal cues allow gamers to interpret the presentation of self of other gamers and meanings behind their statements similar to a face-to-face encounter. Online gamers often initially used voice chat to accomplish in-game objectives and then continued using it for both social and instrumental reasons. Most participants expressed that they continued to play online games because of their relationships with other gamers that they maintain through voice chat. Indeed relationships can be dependable sources of identity support and social support that bring with them emotional energy and therein lies the motivation to continue the maintenance of rewarding relationships not forged by kinship or formal obligations through voice chat.

Online gamers demonstrated and expressed that the stronger their friendship with another gamer the more likely they were to engage in self-disclosure through voice chat. Online gamers often engage in conversation with another gamer, whom they find agreeable, through voice chat and verify their self-view. Verification of one's self-view activates the process of trust. Through the continuation of this process over voice chat the individual develops more trust in and dependence on the other gamer for rewards such as social support. Once the individual trusts the other and the other demonstrates reward dependability, self-disclosure comes easier and feelings

of closeness and commitment can develop (McCall and Simmons 1978). I observed online gamers quickly form friendships through voice chat and provide social support for each other for years.

When assessing experiences related to gender, male participants acknowledged their own male privilege and spoke about sexism they have witnessed female gamers experience in virtual worlds while using voice chat. Some male online gamers expressed that because they are males that they did not have to worry about harassment and disrespect like is the case with female gamers. Many male gamers were aware that just “being a girl” is an obstacle for female gamers and that some male gamers harbor unsupported biases against female gamers such as generalizations that female gamers lack online gaming related skills. Indeed, the majority of male participants were aware of sexism in virtual worlds, but there’s no evidence to suggest that male online gamers are likely to prevent or take actions to stop sexism as of this study. However, my findings suggest that male online gamers have a level of awareness when it comes to male privilege and sexism that has not been documented in past research. Merely playing as a female avatar is not enough to be recognized as a female gamer so online gamers often relied on vocal cues over voice chat to help them identify a gamer’s gender identity. Related to this finding is that male and female participants shared a common observation that the main catalyst that can potentially trigger sexist behaviors against a female gamer is her voice when it reveals her gender identity.

Female and male participants expressed the importance of vocal cues in identifying the gender of a gamer. Most female gamers shared examples of harassment, disrespect, and being stereotyped after they revealed their gender identity over voice chat. Despite past experiences of insults and sexual harassment and potential to experience insults and sexual harassment again

while playing, female online gamers continued to reveal their gender identity through voice chat to participate in group activities with groups disproportionately made up of male gamers. Female online gamers demonstrated perseverance and passion about playing online games. Perseverance, as a behavioral aspect of agency, among female online gamers is a very underdeveloped area of online gaming research and thus warrants further sociological investigation. Perseverance in online gaming can contribute to our understanding of how individuals are able to navigate inequitable social relations that are organized by primary frames for months or years.

Complementing the aforementioned findings on relationships and gender, online gamers often used the label of noob in discourse to regulate the gamer masculinity of other online gamers. As mentioned in chapter 6, noob is the most commonly understood epithet one gamer can call another to affront their identity as a gamer and discipline any deviation from the virtual world's standards of mastery. Competitiveness in computer gaming and mastery of computer games are tied to masculinity (Taylor 2012). While in the United States, traditional masculinity is understood to be related to manliness and behaviors such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, showing strength, competitiveness, and individualism (Hantover 1978; O'Neill 1982; Pascoe and Bridges 2016). Ideal masculinity in gaming culture has been found to include demonstrations of competitiveness and mastery of games (Taylor 2012). To make sense of what gamers are attempting to master I breakdown mastery of online games into the three pillars of mastery: mastery of skills, mastery of knowledge, and mastery of avatar power. Because mastery of skills, knowledge, and avatar power play such a central role in online gaming, performances of masculinity occur often among online gamers while they play in virtual worlds since a majority of online games require a degree of collaboration among mostly male gamers to carryout complex, violent objectives that involve killing. I turned my attention to female online gamers

during my research because I noticed some of their behaviors were similar to male online gamers' behaviors before, during, and after battle. Masculinity does not merely reduce down to the male body and its effects and has been found to be performed by both male and female bodies (Halberstam 2018). In this exploratory study, I used masculinity not as a fixed trait embedded in an individual's body but as a label that identifies a behavior or set of behaviors that accomplish a demonstration or use of power — gamer masculinity in virtual worlds is something you do and/or accomplish. Avatar power in virtual worlds can often be created or obtained by players through leveling up, getting better armor or weapons, and items that increase an avatar's power. Power takes four main forms such as damage output, healing output, amount of damage sustained, and supportive abilities that strengthen teammates or weaken opponents. Mastering skills, knowledge, and power means that an online gamer is masterful in battle as they use their avatar to enact *violence* against players or NPCs to ultimately kill them. A use of physical force or power against others is tied directly to masculinity in western culture (Connell 1991; Polk 1999; Tomsen 1997). Masculinity can be different according to the context of social settings and gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) so these findings might not apply to gamers playing in virtual worlds situated in other cultures. However, if mastery of skills, knowledge, and avatar power demonstrates masculinity when engaged in violence in western culture then an action that points out behaviors that do not demonstrate these masteries is exercising regulatory power over another individual's behaviors. The action that I explored was labeling gamers as noob in discourse and the use of noob as a derogatory label to regulate masculinity.

Participants used the label of noob in various ways, including vocally, to point out behaviors that did not meet community's standards of mastery. Participants and my observations in virtual worlds established that gamers were often labeled noob when they failed to

demonstrate a mastery of skills, knowledge, and/or avatar power in the pursuit of dominance over or killing other gamers or non-player characters (NPCs) in the virtual world. It's a tactic that aims to define what level of proficiency is not acceptable for skills, knowledge, or power, which at the same time defines what level is acceptable. During my observations and interviews there were multiple labels such as bot, scrub, and pleb that surfaced to have nearly the same symbolic meaning and were interchangeable during noob discourse. I lump them under the umbrella concept of noob. Any online gamer can be labeled a noob through discourse at any time in virtual worlds if they fail to meet these mastery standards, even female online gamers. Likewise, female online gamers can label other gamers as a noob.

Female and male gamers regulated masculinity through noob discourse. Noob discourse is an interactional process in which gamers label, define, and often reject the label of noob. The use of noob in discourse occurred in two different types of interactions: either in a serious interaction or in a joking interaction with the latter occurring typically among friends. Both types, joking and serious noob discourse police the boundaries of masculinity. While noob discourse performed in a joking manner, often between friends, has a more subtle regulatory power that allows gamers to avoid insulting others, a derogatory or serious approach to noob discourse is perceived as a serious affront to the accused gamer's identity. Online gamers often rejected the label of noob in various ways that try to mitigate the damage to their reputation or identity as a gamer and male online gamers in particular, were observed to often confront their accuser to re-win their masculinity.

Plans for Future Research

Utilizing the data collected from participant observations and 41 participants for this dissertation, I have identified two specific areas of further research that I plan to pursue related to

virtual worlds. First, I plan to investigate additional computer mediated communication technologies that influence relationship formation and maintenance. There is reason to think that the level of immersion experienced by online gamers influences the strength and rate at which they form relationships with other online gamers in virtual worlds. New technologies such as virtual reality introduce social cues into virtual worlds that are little understood in the virtual world context. I expect that the introduction of additional social cues will make virtual worlds more immersive and thus facilitate the formation and maintenance of relationships made through virtual reality technologies to be nearly identical to those made in the physical world.

Second, I plan to draw upon literature developed by scholars in the area of social stratification, female masculinities, and perseverance to better understand how female online gamers come to develop perseverance, demonstrate perseverance, and in what ways it affects their online gaming experiences. There is reason to believe that female gamers' perseverance has some relationship with agency and subjective beliefs about gender relations given the findings of this dissertation study. An in-depth interview study with female online gamers to get at their perseverance as a behavioral aspect of agency in virtual worlds is needed to fill gaps in online gaming literature.

Aside from the two research agendas outline above, I plan to continue investigating every advance society makes toward experiential equality among virtual worlds and our physical world. Research in this area is important for society beyond scholarly or theoretical applications. Understanding that computer mediated communication channels such as voice chat and one day virtual reality allow individuals a more controlled presentation of self than copresent face-to-face interaction can guide communication therapy practices used for those with speech anxiety or other social anxieties. Likewise, virtual worlds can be a promising social setting for individuals

to behave in healthy ways that they otherwise would not be able to without partial or full anonymity.

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Greetings,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. You have been selected to participate in this research project because your opinions and thoughts as a MMORPG player are highly valued. All of your answers will be taken seriously and possibly used to produce scholarly works that will be read for decades to come. Thus, the more information you can share, the better the outcome of this study. I would like you to know that all of these questions are optional and you are free to end the interview whenever you'd like. Also, I am recording this interview so that I may easily reference the information later on. But please know that everything you say will remain confidential and your identity will always be anonymous and kept a secret. If there aren't any questions we can go ahead and begin the interview.

Avatar Name:

Age:

Gender:

Race:

Location (state/country/nation):

1. Can you tell me approximately how many years you have been playing online games?
 - a. And how many hours per week would say you play online games?
2. Tell me about some of the online gaming friends you have and how long you have known them.
3. What are some of the things you and your gamer friends do on voice chat or video chat programs while playing online games?
4. For you personally, what do you think is the main reason you use voice chat while playing online games?
5. Would you please describe some of the topics or issues you have discussed with others over voice chat.
6. Can you tell me about a specific time when you shared personal information with another player over voice chat?
 - a. How would you describe your relationship with that person?
7. Can you tell me about a time when someone else shared personal information with you?
 - a. How would you describe your relationship with that person?

8. Have you ever helped or gave advice to your online gaming friends not related to the game?
 - a. If so, could you describe a situation or two in detail?
 - b. How often would you say you do that?
 - c. What about you? What kind of support do you get from your gaming friends? Can you describe one example?
9. Tell me about a specific time, if any, when you made a new friend over a voice chat like Ventrilo.
 - a. What kind of players do you like to be friends with?
10. What do you talk about with new online gaming friends you have just met?
 - a. And what about players you have known for a long time?

SOCIAL MEDIA (Some players become friends with each other on social media...)

11. When would you invite another player, who you have never met in person, to be friends with you on social media such as Facebook?
12. If you have become friends on social media with another player, who you have never met in person, how do you interact with each other on social media?
 - a. What kind of things do you talk about?

We are coming to the end of this interview so I only have a few more questions left to ask, would you like to add anything else about how you use social media related to online games?

GENDER

13. How has being a (insert gender identity) affected your experiences in online games?
 - a. What roles do you enjoy playing in group settings such as raids?
 - Can you tell me what makes it enjoyable?
 - b. Have you ever played an avatar of a different gender than yourself? If so, can you tell me what the experience was like? What are the pros and cons of doing so?
14. Often while playing MMORPGs I hear people call someone a Noob. When would you typically call someone a noob?
 - a. What types of people are typically noobs?
 - b. How would you define noob?
 - c. When does this normally happen?

15. If you were recruiting players to join your end game raid/boss fight, what are the most important characteristics for those players to possess in order to get in?

I'd like to thank you for your time and give you the opportunity to say anything else you think is important about online gaming friendships or your personal experiences as a player. Would you like to add anything?

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
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TO: O. Bradley Ictech
Sociology

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: November 5, 2014

RE: IRB# E9074

TITLE: In Real Life: MMORPG Relationship Formation & Maintenance With VoIP Clients

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 11/5/2014

Approved X Disapproved

Approval Date: 11/5/2014 Approval Expiration Date: 11/4/2017

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2a

Signed Consent Waived?: Yes

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable): 41946

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE:**

**All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

APPENDIX C: IRB CONTINUATION APPROVAL

ACTION ON EXEMPTION CONTINUATION REQUEST



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
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TO: O. Bradley Ictech
Sociology

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: May 2, 2018

RE: IRB# E9074

TITLE: In Real Life: MMORPG Relationship Formation & Maintenance With VoIP Clients

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: Continuation

Review date: 5/1/2018

Approved X Disapproved _____

Approval Date: 5/2/2018 Approval Expiration Date: 5/1/2021

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –
Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE:** Please be aware that projects approved by exemption can be active for three years. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

**All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

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VITA

Brad Ictech received his bachelor's degree in Sociology from Southeastern Louisiana University in 2011 then went on to earn his master's degree in Sociology from the University of New Orleans 2014. He plans to receive his doctorate in Sociology from Louisiana State University in 2021 with a research focus on online gaming, social media, and smartphone communications. Ictech is currently running Overdrive Digital Marketing agency out of the New Orleans metropolitan area and conducting independent research.